

Rage Against the Moons IV: Judgment Day

by Sunao Yoshida

Lady Guilty

When he shall be judged, let him be condemned:
And let his prayer become sin.
— Psalms 109:7

"This way, Your Eminence." As Caterina disembarked, she heard a car horn. Looking up, she saw a man waving from next to a parked sedan in the parking lot. "I'm so sorry to keep you waiting in this cold weather, Master Wordsworth."

The elegant woman gave her thanks to Professor, who was dressed in a tweed three-piece suit. She flicked her coat back and started walking.

A lot of snow had fallen in Rome overnight. Caterina had to take care that she didn't slip as she walked on the icy stone street. Caterina pushed the sunglasses covering her face up her nose. Her being in Rome today was top-secret, so she had shunned her clerical garments and cardinal's staff, but her beauty still made her conspicuous in a crowd.

Caterina ignored the gazes from passersby and turned to her traveling companions. "It looks like it's going to snow again. We should hurry. We have to get to the Palazzo Spada before they enter San Pietro."

"I understand, Caterina, but this is pretty heavy," said a person's pathetic voice, his teeth chattering from the cold. It was a young person wearing round spectacles and wrapped in a white overcoat. He took the suitcases into his hands and tottered treacherously along the icy street. "Why have you got so many bags in the first place? It feels like there's a dead body in here... WAAAAAH!"

Abel screamed as he lost his footing on the slippery paving stone. He landed flat on his face and sprawled out then slid down the street until a lamppost stopped his momentum with a loud *thud*. The snow that had been balanced precariously on the lamppost came crashing down around him.

"Please be careful, Master Nightroad."

The brusque voice belonged to a pedestrian, who looked down at the miniature snow mountain that had been created on the street. The small youngster, who was carrying a shoulder bag, deftly removed the suitcase that was peeking out from the snow mountain and then—without checking whether his companion was safe or not—started quietly loading the bags into the trunk.

Meanwhile, Professor didn't attempt to help, instead putting an unlit pipe between his lips.

"You do have quite a lot of luggage. Are you planning on moving here, Your Eminence?"

"My, no. It's just a change of clothes and a few personal items." The beauty shook her head. She looked slightly annoyed. "Our stay here may extend for some time. Anyway, what is the situation with the Concistoro?"

"Cardinal Medici is working hard, but I don't think that there will be any substantial changes."

His boss eyed him.

Standing up straight, Professor answered articulately: "Apart from a few junior cardinals, the majority of the cardinals are in Your Eminence's favor. I think that if there is a breakthrough in this inquiry, then there will be no possibility for a heresy inquest."

"Then it all rests on these next few days. I guess we have those old men's principle of keeping the peace to thank for this. Ironical."

Caterina grimaced and her voice betrayed the trials she had already been through.

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During the Brno War, there were a series of scandals, including the kidnap of the Vatican's Alessandro and the rebellion of Officer Vaclav Havel, which her biggest enemy, Francesco di Medici, had not let her forget. All sources seemed to indicate that he was planning to bring his younger sister in under heresy charges.

Luckily for Caterina, her half-brother's schemes had not had any success. The reason was that the Vatican's highest decision-making body, the Concistoro (which would also make the final decision on whether an investigation were necessary), had consistently taken her side. Francesco argued for the revival of the Vatican's powers and proposed dramatic reforms, which earned some fanatical support, but on the other hand, he was seen as a very dangerous element by the older, higher levels of the clergy, who would stand to lose a lot. And so the person who they hoped could limit Francesco was none other than Caterina. However, she didn't like the thought of being their agent, and it also pained her to be in opposition to her brother.

"Lack of attention is not permitted. After all, those aged clergy are only with us now. If they don't think we can protect them, then they'll pull their support immediately."

"Exactly. However, this scandal is very much within our favor. House arrest for a month and suspension from the church for a year. We can expect at least that."

As head of the Ministry of Holy Affairs and Duchess of Milan, it seemed that Caterina's position was a strong one and that nothing could destroy the honor and power she had gained.

But still...

My hands are dirty.

Her eyes dropped to the pristine white gloves on her hands.

They were the hands that had offered up her younger brother at the altar of power. Hands that had spilled the blood of many men. No matter how much she tried, the stains would never be removed now.

"What's the matter, Miss Caterina?"

Caterina was brought out of her thoughts by the concerned voice. She lifted her head to see not only the young man who had been buried in the snow drift, but also the gentleman who had been packing the trunk; they were both looking at her with worried expressions on their faces.

"Is something the matter? You suddenly went quiet. I know! I bet you're hungry?" Abel asked.

"No." Caterina returned a smile to Abel. She would have to say something sooner or later. However, she shook her head and decided to explore her never-ending labyrinth of thoughts for another time. She smiled at her ever anxious subordinates and then got into the back of the sedan.

"Let's go. If we dilly-dally then we'll get caught up in more snow. I hate the cold."

"Lady Caterina!" Someone called out to her just as the engine started. The voice was jolly, but Caterina could sense an element of urgency in it still. Tres and Abel immediately surrounded Caterina and pulled out their guns. The car that was speeding toward them down the street came to an abrupt halt, accompanied by a screech of its brakes.

"Thank heavens! You're all right!" A clumsy young man tumbled out of the car. His disheveled, bleached, long hair and unusual eyes didn't match his clerical garb. It was Bishop of Valencia Antonio Borgia. He lifted his arms out to embrace the beauty in front of him, but immediately he was stopped in his tracks by the mouth of a gun hitting his nose.

"Put down your gun, Father Tres." Caterina rebuked her subordinate, who wielded the deadly weapon expressionlessly.

"What on earth is the matter? Cardinal Borgia? You seem a little rushed to just be here to greet me. And what do you mean, 'Thank heavens. You're all right'?" Caterina turned to the young man.

"Exactly that!"

Tres lowered his gun. Antonio was at Caterina's side so quickly, it was almost as if he had teleported. He gripped Caterina's hands in his. His actions were presumptuous and rude. His next words made things all the worse. "Miss Caterina. Run away with me!"

"Hah?!"

Bishop of Valencia's name is still probably down in the history books as the only man to have made Caterina pull such an expression. The flippant young man fixed his gaze on Caterina and continued even more passionately. "Come! We must hurry! Ah. As long as I'm with you, I wouldn't mind if we end up in the Dark Lands or the Empire."

"Please, wait a second," Caterina interrupted Antonio. She took a step back and pulled her hand away from his. "Now what are you talking about? Running away? Bishop Borgia, please understand..." Caterina started to talk but she wasn't allowed to finish. From down the street, there was a huge explosion and a clamor of voices.

"Damn! I'm too late!" Antonio screamed. A huge dark shadow edged around the corner. It was gigantic and closely resembled a rhinoceros. Two six-wheeled armored vehicles revealed themselves. They looked like they were about to wreak havoc, but when they came within thirty feet from where Caterina stood her ground, they suddenly came to a halt, blocking all traffic on the street.

"The Carabinieri?!" Caterina mumbled. On the side of the armored vehicles was the mark of the Inquisition's Vineam Domini. "Why are the Carabinieri here?!"

In the blink of an eye, the hatch opened and from out of it jumped down special police officers bearing machine pistols. Like a precise machine, they encircled Caterina with terrifying speed. They clearly wanted to subdue Caterina and her companions as quickly and effectively as possible.

Caterina's officers held their ground with their own weapons. "Come on, you lot. There's no need for this." In the midst of the tension, the voice sounded out of place. "That is no way to treat a cardinal. Always embarrassing me... Your Eminence, my deepest apologies. Please forgive me for my subordinates' rudeness."

The last to get out of the vehicle was the officer. He bowed his head and greeted Caterina correctly. "I am Brother Matthaïos. I am with the Inquisition Committee. I have received orders to come and meet Your Eminence from Cardinal Medici. I will be hoping for your cooperation."

He was a calm, collected young man. Brother Matthaïos' appearance didn't suit the solemnity of his title. He would have been much more natural-looking in a cassock rather than in a Carabinieri uniform.

Caterina returned the man's bow and pleasantries. "Is that so? Well thank you very much, Brother Matthaïos. But you didn't have to come here to meet us. Seeing as how I'm in confinement, I would like to decline your offer to escort us," Caterina replied.

At her words, Matthaïos squinted so that his eyes were nothing more than lines. Then, in the blink of an eye, a gun appeared in his hand as if by magic. It was of such extraordinary speed, that Tres, who had been keeping watch, didn't even have a chance to react.

"I'm terribly sorry, Your Eminence. But this is no escort," the officer said. He aimed the gun straight between Caterina's eyes.

"The Inquisition Committee would like me to arrest you under suspicion of being allied with New Vatican. You are free to resist. But I would warn you that if you do, we are fully prepared to take every action, however reluctantly."

"Is this really all right?" Sister Paula asked, her voice keeping its usual calm.

Brother Matthaïos had given his report to Sister Paula about the transfer from the leader of Milan's custody to the Lateran Palace.

"Won't too many questions be asked now that we've taken Cardinal Sforza into custody? I also think she might slip through our fingers."

"We had DNA tests performed on the blood in the seal. There is no mistaking that it was that woman's."

His voice was blunt as he looked down at the Pope's residence from the window: "Now

she won't be able to interfere with the proceedings of the Concistoro. The Inquisition can proceed without interruption."

"What concern us are not the actions of the cardinals. It is what would happen if Cardinal Sforza is sent to the stake." The Lady of Death's face betrayed a rare moment of hesitation. With a calm tone that sounded like that of a capable secretary, the vice-chief of the Department of Inquisition filled in the gaps. "Let me apologize for not supervising my subordinates better. Cardinal Sforza is His Holiness' sister. If it is decided that she should be burnt at the stake, then we can expect considerable backlash." "But we would have to do something." Since afternoon, powdery snow had peppered the sky. The Pope's residence was now covered in a layer of thin white snow and largely deserted. The air was cold and unwelcoming. But Francesco's eyes as he looked at the document in his hand were worse. "Those New Vatican originals. If only we could find them."

On the file were written names of several members of the clergy and next to them were red thumbprints. Francesco glanced over it again and then tossed it away as if the very sight of it might make him puke. The cardinal sighed. Eighty hours ago, he had received this file. It had been discovered in Spilberk Castle in Brno, which had been the base of New Vatican. Since then, he had not been able to stop his heart palpations.

This was a crime above that of negligence and insubordination, as Paula had pointed out. This might be enough to purge Caterina from the political stage and perhaps even this world. However, Francesco was not experiencing the joy he usually derived from an enemies defeat. *This could get out of hand.*

Caterina's downfall—that was what Francesco desired. He had taken the hard-line to protect the authority of the Vatican, but his half-sister, Caterina, had resisted him the whole time. He had been criticized for his mismanagement of the incident at Brno, and it had been his long-standing desire to see her downfall.

However, execution was another matter. She was a cardinal and his half-sister. If she were executed, then it would create too much of a stir. If they got it wrong, then it could result in Francesco's death, as well. "But, we can't let Caterina go this time. Someone has to get their hands dirty. If we don't have the resolve for this, then there is no saving the Vatican!" His eyes reflected the falling snow; behind that shone selfless devotion.

If the Vatican were to fall, then humans, who had already lost their control over the world, would once again be thrust into a period of war. Swords would clash and the blood of his fellow man would be spilled. And an impoverished human society would be right in the line of sight of the very enemy who desired to consume them.

"As long as they have not been banished from this land, we cannot fall. For that purpose, sacrifices must be made," Francesco muttered and turned his back on the window. The spitting fire in the hearth lit the cardinal's face with a warm orange glow.

His name might go down in history as a criminal. But still... "Someone has to get their hands dirty."

II

"The real question is: how far does the Inquisition Committee want to take this," Professor said as he puffed on a pipe. Laid out in front of him was a map of the city of Rome. In it had been placed two red pins. One marked "Palazzo Spada," where they were, and the other marked "Lateran Palace," where Caterina had been taken. The middle-aged gentleman frowned and crossed his arms as he surveyed the map.

Professor calmly continued: "The Duchess of Milan is a cardinal and His Holiness' sister. They can't really mean to give her the death penalty?"

"I think eventually they'll have to pull down the fist they've raised. I think they will do whatever it takes," Abel replied as he adjusted the collar of his cassock.

"The situation really can't get any worse. It's hard to see how we're going to get a good

outcome," Tres' voice came from the back of the warehouse. He was busy with something.

"Things can't get any worse for me. Caterina's name wasn't on the last list. They probably suspect me now too," Antonio Borgia wailed with an expression like he had to shoulder the worst of the world's woes alone. The young aristocrat was sitting in front of the fireplace, toying with his long hair. "If we protect her, we may as well turn ourselves in. I'm right, aren't I? I'm good at women making sacrifices for me, not the other way round."

"Anyway, Antonio, the list that you burnt in Cologne, didn't include Caterina's name, correct?" Abel interrupted Antonio's complaints. If he was allowed to continue, then the sun would set before they got anywhere. "Are you very sure?"

"I swear. Do you think I'd have been in the company of such a dangerous woman if I'd known her name was on that list?" Antonio finished with a firm nod of his head. It was certainly a persuasive explanation. "The list that the Department of Inquisition says they've found must be a fabrication, without a doubt. A master copy? There never was one in the first place."

Outside, the snow was still tailing. From the special office at the top of Palazzo Spada, one could see the deserted main street. Abel had been watching the falling snow outside the window, but now, he turned around to Antonio and asked, "What do you mean? How can there be no master copy?"

"It's just as I said. As far as I know. New Vatican never created a master copy. There were duplicates but never a master copy. So the Inquisition Committee must have a fake," Antonio explained, but he wasn't making things any clearer.

"There were duplicates but never a master copy. A strange assertion to make," Professor said as smoke escaped his mouth. His voice was listless but there was a sharp light burning in his eyes as he fixed his gaze on the cardinal. "If there was never a master copy, how are there duplicates?"

"Cherubim."

"Cherubim?"

Cherubim were angels who defended wisdom. The two priests frowned at this. Antonio went on to describe what he really meant: "He is a close advisor to Alfonso. He has an amazing memory. It is rumored that he remembers the names of every single participant in New Vatican."

"But that means, you..." Abel was cut off though.

"I memorized only the names of the clergy involved. There were roughly five hundred involved in total. 'Cherubim' knows those names and even the names of their followers. He must have memorized close to thirty thousand full names. I've heard that it's not just names he knows... but he also knows all their secrets... everything from accounts to the hiding places of weapons."

"That is amazing. But Archbishop d'Este must be in an insecure position too then. If this person betrays him, everything would be leaked," Professor said.

"Oh, that wouldn't be possible," Professor shrugged and then lightly tapped the table. "A Cherubim isn't capable of ordinary conversation. He can only memorize information and when asked, reply."

"Huh? He's like a computer. But wait a second. If we can secure this man, then we can settle all of this! Accounts and weapon records won't be on this fake list, will they? And this Cherubim is going to be more believable than some list. It's evidence of resistance!"

Abel was so excited, he started to spit. However, Antonio's face hardened. He shielded his face from the flying phlegm and shrugged.

"If we can find him. We don't know if Cherubim is dead or alive. He was in Spilberk Castle at Brno, but he may have died when Brno fell. Even if he escaped with Alfonso..."

"We don't know where Archbishop d'Este is. How are we going to find a man who has evaded capture even with the whole of the Vatican searching for him? Any ideas, Father Nighthead?" Professor turned to Abel after listening to Bishop of Valencia. He seemed unexcited.

"I think it's probably better if we give up on this line of inquiry. And anyway... Oh? What's

the matter, Father Tres?" Abel was distracted.

The back of the special office was Professor's laboratory, and it was packed full of various pieces of equipment. From out of there appeared a small priest, swamped under a small mountain of luggage.

"Hey, where are you going with that, Tres?!" Abel called out.

Abel jumped to his feet. Hanging from Tres' shoulder was a Vulcan cannon. On his back was a rocket launcher, and several plastic bombs were attached to his waist belt.

"First, we need to storm the Lateran Palace and rescue Duchess of Milan," the mechanical soldier said with the solemnity of an accountant. "Obstacles will be eliminated. Over."

"Storm?! Tres, what are you talking about?!" Abel had been standing there, aghast, mouth wide open, but finally, he managed to pull himself together. He quickly ran to stop Tres, who was about to leave the room. "What is that going to achieve?! You'll just get yourself killed."

"Killed? Death means nothing to a robot. I can only be broken." The machine's answer was without hesitation, but Abel thought he could spot a small ounce of impatience and irritation in those glass eyes. "I am the personal belonging of Duchess of Milan. If she dies, there will be no point to my existence. So Father Nightroad, please get out of my way."

Tres had only meant to nudge Abel lightly, but his strength was enough to throw Abel backward through the open door and into the corridor.

"Aaah!"

The scream wasn't from Father Abel though.

"OW! Oh! I'm so sorry!"

When Abel finally came back to his senses, he realized that the soft surface his head had hit against was in fact the body of a beautiful lady. Panicking, Abel lifted himself up from out of her plump breasts and jumped up to his feet.

"I am so sorry! Are you hurt?!" Abel asked, blushing.

"I'm fine. More importantly, are you hurt, Father?" the girl asked in a husky voice. Abel could see that she was fairly young. Her complexion was as white as snow and gave her a frigid air, but despite that, she was definitely beautiful. Abel wondered if she was a member of the aristocracy. Her hair was tied up in an elaborate fashion and she was wearing a fur coat decorated with gold that attractively accentuated her curves.

"I'm sorry. Actually, I was practicing my act for the Christmas festivities." As Abel helped the woman up from the floor, he desperately racked his brains for an explanation of why Tres was wielding lethal weapons. "We're putting on an educational play. It's called 'The Thirteen Days of Christmas.' Reindeer wearing hockey masks and holding guns, chasing bad children. This is the reindeer," Abel said and pointed to his colleague, who sported a miniature armory on his body.

Abel patted the dust off her coat. He was worried about what he would do if she asked him to pay the cleaning bill.

However, she must have realized his panic, as she then smiled up at him bewitchingly. "This is convenient, really... I was just about to look for someone to ask directions. I don't suppose I could bother you? Do you know which one is Lady Sforza's office?" the aristocratic lady inquired.

"Huh? Umm... Who are you?" Abel eyed the woman suspiciously. Perhaps she was an ambassador of some country. If that was the case, then Abel would want to treat her well.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry. My name is Christa, Countess of Anhalt. I own a small territory, east of Bohemia..."

Unfortunately for Abel, he had no recollection of hearing her name before.

"The truth is, I have a request to make of Lady Sforza. That's why I'm here. Do you know where I might meet Her Eminence?"

"I'm sorry, but she isn't here today," Professor said. Behind the flustered priest, Professor emerged from the room and addressed the aristocrat correctly. He was courteous but professional. "Also, she has a rule of not accepting petitions without a prior appointment. Madam, may I ask your business?"

"I came with a request of Her Eminence."

The woman's face belied her depression. With a handkerchief clasped in her hand, she grabbed hold of Abel's cassock. She clung to him as large tears rolled down her face.

"Please... please... save my husband!"

III

"I'm so sorry, Father."

"Really, it's fine. Have you calmed down a little?" Abel smiled gently. He placed a cup of tea in front of the lady. She seemed to have relaxed finally. "You said that you wanted to save your husband? Why don't you explain?"

"The Count of Anhalt is a minor aristocrat who owns a small amount of territory near Brno."

Aromatic cups of tea steamed in front of the people sitting around the table. The Countess of Anhalt stopped for a moment to take a sip of hers before continuing on.

"In the Brno war, my husband fought with New Vatican. I came from Bohemia to beg Her Eminence to spare his life."

"I'm sure that they will be lenient toward those aristocrats who surrendered, Senora," Antonio spoke gravely. His voice sounded sweet, like coffee with too much sugar in it. At some point, he'd managed to sneak in next to Christa and was gently stroking the hand with which she clutched a handkerchief. "I'm sure his life is secure. So please don't look so sad. It's a loss to the whole world when such a beauty cries."

"M-my..." Christa stuttered.

Antonio may have coated it in nonsense, but the essentials of what he said were true. However, Christa continued to twist the handkerchief between her fingers. It wasn't enough to bring her out of her melancholy.

"My husband hasn't surrendered. He still follows the fake Vatican and is a fugitive."

"That's an issue." Antonio was now lost for words. He frowned.

After Brno had fallen, Alfonso wasn't the only member of New Vatican to go missing. They had received information that said close to three hundred clergy members and believers had followed him into hiding. Christa's husband was one of them. His disappearance must have been particularly hard for his wife, but it suggested that he was a firm believer in their cause.

"I understand, Madam," Professor said as he sat up in his chair. Up until now, he had been listening to Christa's story quietly, with his eyes closed. He was courteous but he stared grimly back at her, as if to force her into submission. "I feel very sorry for you, but Her Eminence won't be able to help you. She has had to postpone all present activities, as she is having personal issues."

"She is?!" Christa's face turned pale.

Caterina was well known for holding a moderate view within the Vatican. This woman must have heard that too, which was why she had come here in the hopes that Caterina could do something. She couldn't hide her heartbreak.

"I... I live in a rural area. I hadn't heard," Christa choked on the words.

"I'm very sorry, but I'm afraid we can't do anything for you today. If we can help you, then we will contact you later," Professor said. Though his reply seemed cruel, it was the only thing they could offer now. It would have been worse to allow her to get hopes up with Caterina's situation the way it was. That really wasn't going to help a rural aristocrat though.

Christa pushed the handkerchief to her eyes and let out a sob.

"Umm, Mrs. Christa..." Abel said as he put a hand on her shoulder. He at least wanted to try and give her some strength. "If there is anything we can do for your husband, we will. So please, don't lose hope."

"Oh, my poor Rudolph." Christa sobbed. Abel's kind words weren't going to comfort a

woman who thought she had just lost her last hope. She sobbed even louder, stricken with grief. "I can't help my husband in that horrible, cold place. What am I going to do?"

"So... sorry, Madam. What did you just say?!" Professor now jumped up at this. He looked like he'd just had a volt of electricity run through his body. He'd thrown all etiquette aside and had run to Christa's side.

"Madam, please. What were you saying? 'A cold place,' was it? Do you mean to say that you know where your husband is located?"

"Urn? Yes..."

Something had gotten this usually reserved gentleman excited. The shock seemed to have jolted Christa out of her grief momentarily. She wiped the tears from her cheeks and then delved into her bag, pulling out a letter.

"A few days ago, this letter came from my husband." Christa then proceeded to read the contents of the single sheet aloud. "To my beloved Christa, I am now prospering with the leader of the true Vatican. You don't need to worry. You need to think of yourself. I look up at the Tallinn sky and pray for your happiness."

"Tallinn!" Professor exclaimed. It was the only word of the whole letter that attracted his interest. He didn't need to hear the rest of the letter, which no doubt spoke of things like looking after his favorite hunting dog.

"My husband said that he was in a hurry and that they were due to leave as soon as he had finished writing his letter... Was there something of interest?" Christa inquired.

"Most definitely, Madam. Estonia. . . Lady, this is information of great importance!" Professor turned to his colleagues. "This could help us locate Alfonso d'Este! They must have fled to Estonia!"

Estonia was between the Dark Lands and the Baltic Sea. It was a small country that spent half the year deep in snow. The country was poor and lacked suitable roads, so it went largely ignored by the surrounding countries.

The remote area would be the perfect place for the remnants of New Vatican to hide. At this time of year, the area would be under heavy snowfall. Any pursuers probably wouldn't get far under those conditions.

"Your husband was in Krakow. Humph, they went from Jagiello and then lost their pursuers in a wasteland. From there, they headed north. When Tallinn's winter has passed, they probably intend to head into one of the northern territories. It would make sense."

"But if we manage to capture Alfonso, do you think he'll have this Cherubim with him?" Antonio asked Professor, who was now stabbing numerous new pins into the map like a machine gun. "Cherubim might be dead, but if he is alive, he may be persuaded to stray from New Vatican."

"That's the gamble we must take," Professor replied simply as he put in a final pin. "Breaking into the Lateran Palace, rescuing the duchess, and rebelling against the Vatican. Then running after Cherubim, who may be dead or alive. What do you think? Father Tres?"

"There are too many unknown factors." Tres shook his head, his face expressionless. "It is impossible to calculate the probability now."

"And that is why it is a gamble... Abel, you decide."

"Huh? Me?" Abel blinked at being suddenly called on. He pointed to himself and shook his head furiously. "Why me? Professor, you should decide."

"Sorry, but I have bad luck when it comes to gambling. Father Tres has no intuition... And you're the one who's known Duchess of Milan longest. You decide."

As Wordsworth said the word "longest," a shadow of sorrow crossed his face. But it was only for a moment. He quickly recovered; taking charge again, he looked at the blond-haired Abel. "I'm leaving the choice to you, Father Abel. What is your decision?"

"What?! Aren't I the strongest?! How could I not eat food here? Yes?" cried Brother Phillippo of the Department of Inquisition, also known as "the round eel."

The van that was stopped outside of the Palazzo Spada was outfitted with a mountain of surveillance equipment. It also was currently carrying four special agents. There was barely room to breathe. Even so, the smallest of them crossed his short legs, taking up enough space for two, as if he had all the authority in the world. Just as he was about to say more, something caught his eye. "Hey! You!"

The special agent was glaring at what had only recently been four pastries but had now been squished into a big ball. He glared at the young corporal in indignation; spit flew from Phillippo's mouth as he raged: "What is this? This is pumpkin pie."

"Yes, that's right. Your Honor told us to go and buy pie." "Idiots! When you're told to buy pie, we always mean eel pie! Cretins! You should know what the chief likes without us having to tell you!"

"I'm sorry. I'll go and buy some more!" "Do it quick! If you make this mistake again, you'll hang for it. Damn, I'm surrounded by idiots." Phillippo continued with the insults as he swallowed the pie whole.

"And why the hell did Paula make us do this boring job? I bet she's just jealous of my ability."

It had been three hours since they had started the watch for the Ministry of Holy Affairs. Phillippo had been sitting down so long that he felt like his butt had worn a groove in the seat. He knew that they were stuck there until the people they were watching made a move.

"Crap, look at that. I'm going to finish this here. When I take that idiot, Petro, down and rise to the head of the department, then I'm going to get that woman back. Mwahaha!"

"Umm. Your Honor?"

While the round eel was still lost in his thoughts of what he would do when he was more powerful than his bosses, someone disturbed him from behind. One of the special agent's face muscles stiffened. He had noticed something in his binoculars.

"There's a car coming out. A black sedan... It's an AX Agent driving!"

"WHAAAT?!" Phillippo grabbed the binoculars off the agent and peered into them. There was indeed a black sedan emerging from the front gate of Palazzo Spada. At the wheel, with a pipe in his mouth, was a middle aged man. In the front passenger seat and backseats were the shadows of other people, one of them smaller.

"Crap! Follow them! Hurry!" Phillippo continued to watch the accelerating sedan drive off. He kicked the driver's seat in his own vehicle. "Mwahahaha! Got you now!" Phillippo let out a shrill laugh and held on tight to prevent himself from being thrown out of his seat as the van raced after the sedan.

The speeding sedan was headed east toward Caelian Hill. Located there was the Lateran Palace—a cathedral that was one of the Vatican's palaces—the very building in which Caterina was incarcerated. Phillippo had no doubt that they were headed to save their leader.

Even so, he had not expected them to act so quickly. They had been waiting for them to try and save her but had thought they might need to push them into acting.

"Hey, hey! This is going to be my moment! The start of my glorious reign!" Phillippo started to gloat and snort in glee. He was certain that now he was going to get a chance to do all those things he had been imagining. He cheered on his staff, the eel pie incident now entirely forgotten. "We're going to get so much credit for this. If you work hard here, then when I'm made Chief, I'll make sure that you all got your dues! Mwahahaha... Harrumph?!" His laughter and celebration was abruptly cut short. The van came to a screeching halt. There was the smell of burning rubber. Phillippo's stumpy body was thrown sharply forward, out of his seat.

"Crap! That hurt! Why the hell did you stop like that?!"

"I'm sorry! They suddenly —

The driver was cut short by Phillippo hitting him over the head, but it was as he had tried to say: the sedan had suddenly pulled to the side of the road. There was still a ways to go to the Lateran Palace, though. Perhaps there was a problem with the engine? The middle-aged man

who got out of the sedan seemed calm. He lit up his pipe and then slowly walked over to Phillippo's van.

"Has he noticed us?!" Phillippo ducked his head.

The man who was now standing right next to Phillippo's van casually knocked on the window. "I can see you've been hard at work. Being special agents at the Department of Inquisition must be strenuous. Why don't you come and take some tea with us?"

"TEA?" Phillippo thought this must be a trick. Were they trying to trap him?

However, the fact of the matter was, he had been discovered. Phillippo decided that he needed to find the right moment to make his escape and leave his staff to this. He opened the door.

"Heh heh heh. You are an idiot, Officer." Phillippo smiled, full of confidence. "It is useless to try and save your leader. You are totally surrounded. I suggest you surrender quietly. Yes?" Phillippo tried to maintain the bluff that he was in control of this situation.

"What?" Professor shrugged his shoulders exaggeratedly and looked down at the Inquisition officer as if he had found some mysterious, new creature. "I don't understand. I was just offering you some afternoon tea. Save Duchess of Milan? How would I manage that? By myself?"

"Bwaha! Don't play innocent with me! You're not going to trick me with offers of tea! I know you're all in there!"

"All?" The priest pulled a quizzical face as he looked down at the Inquisition officer. "I really have no idea what you're talking about. Are you talking about her?"

It was at exactly that time that the backdoor of the sedan opened. A small person got out.

"Umm... Professor Wordsworth, is this wig all right?"

Phillippo looked over to see a nun wearing a men's cassock and a wig.

Professor nodded. "You're doing a good job, Sister. Could I ask you to clear away the Doll on the passenger seat?"

"What?"

Phillippo looked on in disbelief as the Doll was taken off the passenger seat and the air let out of it. Professor seemed satisfied when this was done.

"It's one of those new Dolls to discourage thieves. You can never be too careful these days. Why, the other day..."

But Phillippo wasn't listening to the self-satisfied Professor anymore. He grabbed at the wig and saw it was only a cheap costume hair that could have been purchased anywhere. He pursed his lips. "You were a decoy. Damn you!"

He'd been tricked! The round eel went perfectly pale.

Professor smiled gently again. "Oh, my. I don't know what happened, but you shouldn't let it get to you. Are you sure you wouldn't like a cup of tea?"

IV

"**A**X have acted." Paula's image on the monitor was calm. She looked more like a librarian than the feared and shrewd second-in-command of the Department of Inquisition.

"They diverted the attention of our decoy, Phillippo, and Crusnik and Gunslinger headed to the airport to hoard the Iron Maiden. They are probably trying to escape Rome."

"Escape Rome? Humph. This was unexpected." The young officer only narrowed his eyes. He was sitting six-thousand and five-hundred feet in the skies above Rome, on the bridge of the military airship *Jahoel*. Nevertheless, his quiet face was clouded with dissatisfaction.

"We thought that they would attempt to rescue their leader from the Lateral) Palace. We were taken off guard."

"Yes. We had not anticipated that they would head for the airport. Jacob and Andrew are hurrying to there as we speak, hut it won't be possible for them to stop the Iron Maiden from departing. Is there anything the Jahoel could do, Brother Matthaios?"

"We will try our best, but I am not sure. At least ensure that you are ready to give chase. Humph, this is not what we wanted."

Paula's feed was cut from the screen. Matthaios quickly stood up and turned to the staff onboard.

The *Jahoel* was a new and awesome power within the Vatican's fleet, but its main duty was delivering land troops to violent battlefields and then conducting airborne warfare. It was suited as an assault ship. It didn't have much capability as an anti-ship machine.

"Do you think we can win, Captain Cambio? Honestly?"

"Difficult to say," Cambio answered Matthaios' question with a grim look on his face. Commander Arnold d'Cambio assessed the RADAR. "If the specifications we've received of the enemy ship are correct, then we are at a disadvantage. I would say that it would be very difficult for us to win a battle if we were to meet them head-on."

"Even if there is an altitude difference?" Matthaios indicated a monitor that displayed an altitude graph.

The *Iron Mai Jen* had only just departed. The *Jahoel* on the other hand was now at an altitude of six-thousand feet. It could be expected that if they were to battle now, then the *Jahoel* would be victorious. However, Cambio still looked grim.

"Unfortunately, if were to attack from our current position, then the city would most definitely take damage. We would have to wait for the enemy to leave the city area, but then it would be too late," Cambio said.

As he spoke, a blue line appeared on the graph. The steep line indicated that the ship would be at a higher altitude than the *Jahoel* by the time it had left the suburban area.

"The greatest altitude that the enemy can reach is nine thousand. Three-thousand feet higher than the *Jahoel*. In other words, by the time the enemy has left the city area and we are able to attack, they will already be above us."

"In that case, it makes the problem simple. I want you to open fire straight away," Matthaios said without hesitation.

"Sorry?!" Cambio didn't believe that he had heard Matthaios correctly. Perhaps Matthaios hadn't understood his explanation.

Cambio started to repeat himself. "The problem is, Your Honor, that Rome would be —"

"I understand. Do not worry about ground casualties. Please open fire now. If we do not down that ship soon, then they will escape us. Our best chance is when we are above them, correct?" Matthaios remained unchanged.

There were no signs of insanity in the Inquisition officer's expression. However, what he was asking them to do was madness. All the faces of the staff on the bridge of the ship went deathly pale.

He was asking them to get the citizens of Rome involved!

"Oh, yes. Before you fire at the enemy ship, make sure you fire a shot into the city area first." Matthaios' orders were becoming more insane.

"What?! You want us to fire into the city?! On purpose?!"

"Of course. Do you not understand? If we shoot down the enemy ship and there are massive Roman casualties, we will take responsibility." Matthaios spoke as if he were a patient lecturer, slowly explaining to a pupil who had misunderstood. "However, if they fire first, then it's a different story. We would have had to engage the enemy above the city to quickly squash the threat and reduce casualties. That is the story we will give."

"What?!" Cambio choked.

While the staff was lost for words, staring at this monster who had boarded their ship, Matthaios unrolled the map of Rome. He deliberated over the details on the map. "But I want you to avoid historical buildings and churches. Public buildings would work. I think the residential area around the Tiber." "But, civilian casualties. . ."

"Unavoidable. Anyway, I've been thinking that the city population has been getting too high lately. This is a good opportunity to address that. Try and make a good show of it." Matthaios smiled. He looked more like a new teacher, fresh out of university, than a man of the

cloth. In his narrow eyes, there was an ominous glint akin to a bubbling lunacy.

"In the name of our Lord, the dead will find ecstasy. They will surely go to heaven upon their death. That can only be an enviable thing," Matthaios said, as if to comfort them.

Cambio opened and closed his mouth, looking for the words to refuse Matthaios' orders. But he couldn't find the strength, so he resigned himself to his plight.

"Ready cannon three. Angle is seventy-nine degrees." "Ca-captain?!"

"It doesn't matter. I'll take responsibility!" Cambio shouted down the voices of dissent. "Gunners! What are you doing? Ready the cannon!"

"Please, Captain. There's a communication coming in from the enemy ship!" one of the poor subordinates cried.

This unexpected development interrupted Cambio's orders. The communications officer pushed the headset closer to his ears and didn't turn around.

The communication officer relayed the message: "Hold fire! We have no desire to fight here. We wish to talk to the officer in charge. They wish to negotiate!"

In the next instance, a loud noise burst out of the speakers. The monitors then sprung into life with a grainy black-and-white picture.

"We have connection. It's a member of AX," the communication officer said.

Matthaios quietly inspected the bespectacled youth on the screen in front of him. Matthaios' voice was measured: "We are both busy. Let's not waste time with chit-chat. It's time for us to fight to the death."

The man on the other side coughed. "*Oh, is that how it is?*" The voice that came out of the speakers was full of self-importance. "*We actually have a hostage. If you value this person, Mister Matthaios, then I would hope that you could leave us alone, this once.*"

"Hostage?" Matthaios questioned. The second hand on the clock was half-way around. If he wanted to recall the order to fire, then it would have to be soon. "Who is the hostage? If you're referring to Sister Kate, then I'm afraid that she is now considered one of you, and I will give the order to fire. She will not save you."

"*Wa-wait! Brother Matthaios.*" Someone else broke into the feed. It wasn't the pitiful voice of a nun. The blonde clergyman was pushed to one side and a new face peered out of the fuzziness on the screen. It was a rough-looking young man with disheveled blonde hair, but he was clearly an aristocrat none the less. "*I'm the hostage! Don't fire! I don't want to die!*" "Cardinal Borgia?!" Matthaios raised one eyebrow at this new development. "Cardinal, why are you there?"

"*Hee hee; I'm sorry but this is kidnap situation now,*" the original speaker reappeared. The priest pushed a gun to his captives head. "*If you value his life, I suggest you let us go. If you don't, then... I guess, he'll lose his life or something. We'll let you think. We'll be waiting. Don't do anything stupid, like call the police.*"

"Let's stop this farce now," Matthaios muttered. He had been taking notes. When he looked up, the staff members in the room could almost see the fire of purgatory burning in his eyes. "The Department of Inquisition is the sword of God. Such threats are useless against us. Captain, I want you to proceed. Prepare to fire. Aim straight at the enemy."

"But... Cardinal Borgia!" Cambio's face was still drained of blood as he desperately tried to get a revised order from Matthaios. If they fired, then there would definitely be questions later.

However, Matthaios walked toward the communication equipment as if nothing had happened. He reached out to the switch as he replied calmly to Cambio: "Captain, didn't you hear what Cardinal Borgia just said? He asked us to not care for his life but to crush the enemies of God."

"*What? No I didn't...*" Antonio said, still transmitting. He panicked and tried to refute Matthaios' claim, but Matthaios swiftly flicked the switch.

He looked up at the screen as it faded to gray. Matthaios then repeated his order calmly once more. "We must not waste the spirit His Eminence has displayed in sacrificing himself to the cause. Now, Captain, did you hear me? Fire the main cannons."

"Ye-yes, sir!"

The bridge was in panic. The gunners who were in charge of aiming exchanged shouts. In the next moment, the RADAR showed the shining point of the enemy ship swiftly rising. If they were trying to escape now, it was already too late.

"Cannons are aimed. We're ready to go!" one of the gunners yelled.

"Sinners are taken from this earth; as the guilty burn, we raise our souls to heaven. Hallelujah," Matthaios muttered a small prayer and then pointed into the sky. "Fire."

"*Brother Matthaios, wait.*" The gentle voice of a woman had stopped the Inquisition officer, whereas everything else had failed. "*Halt the attack. Pull back.*"

"What?" Matthaios looked up. The main monitor displayed the image of a beautiful girl. Matthaios' face twitched just a little when he saw her. "If we don't act now, then they will escape, Sister Paula." As Matthaios spoke, he could see the cloud cover outside the window start to break. The giant white beast that rose out from the cloud was the *Iron Maiden*. It was right in front of the *Jahael* and was starting to exceed it in altitude. "Letting them go free will be a huge blow to the glory of God and the Vatican. We must strike now."

"*It will not.*" Paula's voice was firm. "*Cardinal Borgia is the son of the Hispanic chancellor. If we kill him, then it will damage relations with Hispania. This is the will of Cardinal Medici. Brother Matthaios, you will withdraw now.*"

As he listened to Paula speak, the white ship was moving farther from them. Matthaios trembled a little as he watched something that had been within his grasp escape him. He had been only seconds away from saying the words that would have laid waste to his foes. "Understood."

"*Good. I want you to return to base. We will consider our next course of action. Meet in an hour.*" Paula gave her orders and then the screen went blank. The Inquisition officer was left alone, gazing silently out the window.

"I didn't think they would escape," Matthaios muttered.

He stood there, watching until the *Iron Maiden* was nothing more than a thin, white trail of exhaust. Finally, he broke the silence with a curse. "Heretic scum."

"Ah, here you are, Isaak."

When Puppeteer found his colleague that evening, he was in the middle of feeding his pets. On the wall of the gloomy chess room was a large water tank. Standing next to it was a graceful figure, dressed entirely in black. He looked like he was going to a funeral.

"It appears that Duchess of Milan is being held in custody in Rome. She is suspected of heresy and helping the enemy. She has been stripped of her power as the head of the Ministry of Holy Affairs and as Cardinal. She's been confined to the Lateran Palace."

"I see."

Swimming in the tank was a monstrous fish close to six feet in length, with scales like pinecones covering its whole body. The giant fish's open mouth greedily consumed whole schools of beautiful little fish. Magician grinned, having found something amusing either in what he saw or what he heard.

"The preliminary inquest of the cardinals is complete. Tomorrow, the Inquisition will open at Castle Saint Angelo."

"What? That's boring."

Inside the tank, the giant fish was chasing some more prey. Thanks to a ferocious appetite, it swallowed the smaller fish. There was no pity in Puppeteer's eyes as he watched the cruel scene. Instead, he stuck his tongue out as if he were watching a show.

"I guess not everyone can be extraordinary. Oh, but did you hear? *He* escaped Rome. He abandoned his leader and fled," Puppeteer spoke, his voice full of mischief.

"Oh, he left Rome?" Magician said. Today there was something different in his voice. He turned away from the aquarium to look at his colleague. "Is that true, Puppeteer?"

"It is. Gunslinger and *Iron Maiden* escaped together. They've managed to escape the

Vatican's surveillance net, and we don't know where any of them are. They are pretty clever, no? But this is the end of Duchess of Milan. The list that you made was perfect. Those feeble-minded idiots at the Vatican will never realize that it's a fake."

"You're right. And it will also be a good excuse to call them here."

The aquarium became still again. All of the smaller fish were gone. The monstrous fish had begun swimming around, evidently satisfied. But Magician's eyes were melancholy.

"That which must not, cannot be' – Morgenstern. They left Duchess of Milan in danger. They left her in enemy hands and departed Rome..."

"The situation is starting to diverge from the imagined scenario," Puppeteer said and then pulled a small file out from behind his back – something he had kept hidden from Magician up until this point. It was a plan of AX's airship, the *Iron Maiden*.

"It seems that they're presently headed north. I wonder what they could be looking for?"

"North?" Magician squinted at the map. He let out a small, shrill sound as he came to a realization. "So that's how it is."

"Yes. Exactly." Puppeteer nodded.

There was the sudden noise of bubbling water. From inside the aquarium, there was a huge disturbance. The monster fish that had been swimming around happily was now hitting the sides of the tank, in obvious pain. It was then that an abnormal change took place.

The stomach of the monster fish swelled to an abnormal size and then, in an instant, blood spurted out of it from all sides. It wasn't just blood that came flooding from its abdomen. Mixed in with the blood were shoals of small fish. The fish that had been swallowed whole had proceeded to eat up the internal organs of the now-bloated monster fish with their razor sharp silver teeth.

"No matter how strong something may seem, there may be an unforeseen weakness within," Magician muttered.

The monster fish feebly tried to resist, but as it wriggled in a cloud of its own blood, it was clear that its time was up. The red haze filled the tank and hid the pitiful scene.

"Oh, I'd forgotten. There was an internal flash point for us."

"You've remembered. I think it would be a good idea for you to take care, Isaak," Puppeteer said and smiled.

He turned his attention back to the aquarium just as the red cloud dispersed. There was no recognizable remnant of the monster fish left; only Magician's beloved tiny fish frolicked in the tank, now.

His eyes glittering like living gems, Puppeteer whispered in Magician's ear: "After all, there are so many people who would like to drag you down. And they could be *anywhere*."

Brave Heart

Behold now, the city is near to flee unto, and it is a little one.
— Genesis 19:20

I

Before he realized it, he could no longer hear the yells of his pursuers anymore. Had they finally given up? Hidden behind one of the trashcans on the street, Eulis breathed a sigh of relief.

"Am I... saved?" Eulis' voice wavered from his cold lips as he suffered in the frigid air. The youth looked up into the cloudy sky. It had been snowing since sundown. Tomorrow would be Christmas Eve, and it looked like it was going to be a white Christmas. The dark streets were as quiet as a ghost town, and the shadows cast by the lamps lay lonely on the stone cobbles.

How much had they ruined this town?

Eulis had only planned to check the situation out and then withdraw. So he had sneaked

out of the safe house. But in less than half an hour, he had been spotted and chased. If this town's geography hadn't been wrapped up in such darkness, then he would have been captured long ago.

"So, what do I do now?" Eulis asked the snow, tears welling in his eyes.

They ruled Tallinn by fear, and under the banner of "charity," they took the wealth of the citizens. If things continued, it was not hard to imagine that many people wouldn't make it through the winter. But their power was inconceivable. Even the knights of the castle couldn't stand up to them. Now that he had lost everything, what could Eulis do?

The falling snow seemed to suck the noise out of his surroundings. Lost in his despair, it wasn't until they were right next to Eulis that he noticed their presence.

"What have we here? You shouldn't be here, Your Honor. We've been looking for you," said a small voice right next to his ear.

Eulis' whole body tensed. He turned around, and when he did, right in front of him, he saw two monks dressed in coarse habits.

The short monk introduced himself. "Good evening. I'm Alois, a New Vatican monk. And this is Monk Richter."

The color of his skin was strange—evidence of the drugs and surgery they employed to strengthen themselves physiologically.

Alois eyed the retreating Eulis with a repellent smile on his face. "I was wondering who could be breaking the evening curfew, and look who it is... you! And we thought that you had died when the castle fell, Count."

"There's a curfew?! How dare you be so insolent?! You're the invaders!" Eulis' delicate face filled with rage when he heard the unholy monk's words. Eulis Ruutel, Count of Estonia, pulled out a handgun from his pocket. "The only person who can make such a decree is the leader of the country—me! I will not allow this! Especially from filthy heretics!"

"You won't allow it?"

The voice was now speaking from behind him. By the time he'd realized that the short monk was no longer in front of him, his wrist was already being restrained by a grip strong enough to crush his bones.

"What are you going to do then, Your Honor?" Alois ridiculed Eulis as he wrenched the gun from his hands.

Eulis let out a scream of frustration. The mouth of the gun was now pointing directly at him.

"New Vatican has chosen Tallinn to be our seat of power—an honor which such a remote place is not worthy. You should be delighted, but instead you call us heretics? You nonbeliever!" Alois' face was distorted in rage. He glared down at Eulis and his voice turned to a scream: "We fight for the glory of God and the true faith! And you call us heretics! Such a crime is punishable by death!"

Eulis was still on the ground. He swallowed hard as the gun was thrust closer to his face. He was paralyzed with fear. Slowly, Alois squeezed the trigger.

A calm voice stopped the monk's finger: "Here we go. I thought there was no one on the streets. I thought that in the rural areas no one came out after dark, but here we are. There was martial law all along. Now I understand." The man continued to speak, his relaxed manner in sharp contrast to the mood of the evening.

"What are you doing?" Alois glared at this intruder, his finger still poised over the trigger.

This newcomer was frighteningly tall. Behind blonde hair that reflected the light were his bright blue eyes, which reminded Eulis of a lake in winter. However, it wasn't the man's appearance that captured Alois' attention. Peeking out from under his heavy coat was what looked like a cassock.

"A priest? I've not seen you before. Which troop are you with? Your diocese and position?"

"Umm. My diocese is the Roman Vatican and my position..." The man smiled as he pushed his glasses up his nose. "My position is in the Papal State Affairs Special Operations Section, otherwise known as AX."

"WHAT?!"

Eulis looked up at the two monks and saw that they had both turned a deathly pale color. Then, from one of the buildings looking down on the street, a monotonous voice came: "Rewriting stationary tactics to Assault-mode—Combat Open."

The very next second, an almighty roar of gunshots filled the night sky.

By the time he'd realized they were being shot at from above, the tirade of bullets had already mercilessly cut down one of the monks. The tall monk, Richter, collapsed next to Eulis, his limbs shot through.

On the other hand, the shorter Alois had managed to evade the attack and now screamed into the night air. "AX?! Then you are the dispatch officers?!"

Alois leapt up with inhuman strength and raised the handgun above his head. He had locked onto his target and was about to pull the trigger, but before he had the chance, a flying trash can hit the back of his head.

The trash can was packed full of snow and was very heavy. When he came crashing down to the stone cobbles, Alois' eyes rolled back in his skull. He'd been knocked out cold.

The blonde priest, who had began of all this, snorted. "Nice team work! Don't you think we really click? Don't you think? Father Tres? We're like peas in a pod. V"

"I do not understand your meaning, Father Nightroad," Father Tres replied, his voice so emotionless that it was almost frightening. It seemed to lack humanity. The figure dropped from the sky, like a ball of steel. The short man had his hair tied back. He looked down at the collapsed monks.

"Sir, tie these men up. I will bring Cardinal Borgia and Countess Anhalt."

"Yes, sir," the blonde priest acknowledged. He didn't seem to bear any ill will over being given orders. He offered a hand out to Eulis, who was still on the floor, and smiled. "Are you all right? That was bad luck. And the day is so cold. Oh, you don't have to worry. We are not with these men."

"Then who are you?" Eulis could see that the two men in front of him were clergy, but they didn't seem to be with New Vatican. Considering they were able to defeat tuned soldiers within seconds, it was clear these were not ordinary men, either. "Who the hell are you?!"

"I'm Abel Nightroad," the blonde priest replied. Again, he pushed his glasses up his nose and smiled. "We are traveling priests from the Vatican."

II

Dark clothing hung from the ceiling lights. The New Vatican occupation had imposed strict blackout laws on Tallinn, and the only hotel in the town was no exception to the rule. Dark shadows moved in the attic.

"Well, this is a surprise."

One of the figures looked up at the dim yellow arc lights and groaned in admiration. Even in a large city, it was pretty rare to see electric lighting, but there it was—proof that the electric power stations were in good condition.

"I'm surprised that such a remote area like this has electricity. And the town is much nicer than I had imagined. There must be quite a lot of money here."

"All of it is under the power of the count."

The ten or so local residents who were listening to the comments of their guests from Rome twitched a little to hear their home referred to in this way. Among them, the one next to Eulis seemed to be acting as the representative to the group. With an air of self-importance, he started explaining: "Three years ago, the count inherited the family estate, and he really invested in developing the town. He built a power station, a school, and a hospital. If it weren't for the count, Tallinn would be nothing but a poor rural town, still."

"Sergei, stop it. What I did was very minor. Nothing special," Eulis said modestly. He took something small out of his pocket and smiled. "If we want to thank someone, we should be

offering our thanks to this. I just recognized its potential."

"What is that?" Abel looked at the item Eulis offered to him. In that slim hand was a small black pebble. "Coal? So small?"

"It's called Oilshell. There are large mineral deposits of it in the mountains around here," Eulis spoke very seriously as he rolled the stone in the palm of his hand. He didn't much look like the leader of a country – more like a scientist with a serious passion for research. "The truth is, in between the grains of this mineral is oil. When I was a student, I studied in Albion. There, I refined a process for purification."

"You can get oil from this?" Abel's eyes were wide behind his glasses.

Since Armageddon, fuel had been a precious resource, and the oil-producing countries like Hispania and Albion were all major powers as a result. But if a small country like Estonia could harvest oil, then they would gain unfathomable wealth. No doubt they'd be able to build schools and hospitals.

"It was thanks to this that I managed to turn Tallinn's fortune around. The business is still on a small scale and our operations are only limited to one mountain and purification center, but we are hoping to expand," Eulis explained.

"Oh. That would explain the big pipe we saw on our way here," Abel said, remembering their trip to Tallinn.

"Yes. That pipe is connected to a mountain about twenty-five miles from the city and leads to a purification plant."

From the window, they could see the mountain range in the distance. It formed a natural rampart around Tallinn.

"Inside is a high-powered conveyer. It carries the mineral from the mountain to the purification center. But I was worried that New Vatican may have broken it. I was on my way back from checking on the center when I was discovered."

"I see. And you said that New Vatican has occupied this town for a week now?" Abel questioned the citizens who were shrouded in a thin darkness. "What happened to the country's soldiers? Did they not fight to protect the city?"

"Of course, everyone fought bravely... but we still lost," Eulis' expression fell. His lips pursed and his voice wavered a little. "We had the numbers and the equipment but the strength of the enemy far surpassed our own. I commanded the knights myself, but we were no match. If the knights had not so bravely kept to the posts as the castle fell, then I don't know what would have happened to me."

Count of Estonia fell silent. Perhaps he was embarrassed that the castle had been lost while under his command. Or perhaps he was lamenting the loss of life. His whole body shook a little. The citizens seemed to feel his pain and they all sighed.

New Vatican may have been defeated by the church's troops at Brno, but they still possessed tuned soldiers and war vehicles. They would have easily crushed a civilian force.

"I see. I think I understand. We won't be able to expect any help from you then?"

All the citizens fell silent at this. It was quite an inappropriate remark, following what was just said. But it wasn't Abel who made the tactless comment. This time, the youth had spoken up. Up until now, he had been examining his split ends, looking distinctly bored.

"Abel, it seems like we lose the bet. There is no way we can get our hands on Cherubim in this situation. If we're discovered by them, then it'll be the end of us too. But I guess if we go back to Rome now, we're dead men anyway." Antonio had painted a grim vision of the future with his usual upbeat voice.

"We continue the operation to take Cherubim," the robots voice said. The short priest looked out the window and shook his head. "Taking Cherubim is our top priority. If we give that up, then we will never be able to return to Rome."

"That may be true, Father Tres. So what do you think we should do? There are three hundred of us. But they have tuned soldiers as well as machine soldiers," Antonio contended. "We're only four people. Countess Anhalt, me... Look, why don't we give up and go back to Rome? We might be forgiven still?"

Tres just stared back at the foolish young man, who was now checking his nails.

"Umm... Could you not use your influence to go to Rome and bring backup?" Eulis asked timidly, all the while looking at the cold eyes of Tres.

No one would think that Eulis was the kind of man to lead an army of knights in a heroic battle. But he was clearly not entirely without strength, as he did not shy from an opportunity to save his fellow countrymen.

"They intend to stay here throughout winter. When spring comes, they'll flee their pursuers and head farther north. But by then, they'll have exhausted this town's resources and most of us will have died of starvation. Fathers, will you not go and call reinforcements from Rome?"

"I'm very sorry, Count. But we can't." Abel sounded genuinely sorry as he shook his head.

"As I explained before, we're now considered rebels in Rome. Even if we could call reinforcements, the church's army is already stretched due to the war with the heretics. And if they did come in pursuit of New Vatican, the town would probably already be devastated."

"No." Eulis covered his face with his hands. His townsmen looked at him with concern. A hushed silence, colder than the freezing air outside, shrouded the room.

"Umm, may I? I may have thought of a good plan..." Countess Christa Anhalt broke the cold silence of the room. This was the first time the aristocratic wife, whose husband had joined the forces of New Vatican, had spoken. "New Vatican follow the false leader, Alfonso d'Este, correct? Then why don't we take that old man as a hostage? If we can do that, then they'll have to do as we say."

"Ha ha, what an excellent suggestion, Senora. But it's not possible," Antonio said as he furiously shook his head. He spoke for the rest of the silent group. "He'll be stuck in the back of the castle with three hundred men between us and him. There's no way we could even get near him to take him hostage. We could try sneaking in, but the chances of us getting caught are considerable, and then we'd be killed."

"Oh, I wasn't saying we sneak in." Christa pouted and continued on: "We'll have the townspeople turn the count in. That way, the castle will be opened up and we'll be able to get in."

"WHAT?!"

Everyone in the room thought they must have misheard. They all looked at Christa now. She smiled back, her beauty and astonishing words keeping her audience captivated.

"When the count meets Alfonso, he can overpower that old man. Then, with the doors open, the citizens can enter the castle. We trick the heretics into thinking that we will return Alfonso to them, gather them in one of the gunpowder warehouses, and set fire to it. I often saw the servants burn pests like that."

"Um... well... yes... it's an i-i-idea," Antonio stuttered.

The citizens were fascinated by this dangerous suggestion. But before this dangerous plan was pursued any further, Abel rushed to speak. "I'm really sorry, but I don't think we can use that idea, Christa. There would be far too dangerous for the count. He would have to secure Archbishop d'Este alone. He could hide weapons on his person, but the risk is still far too great."

"Oh? But the count is a brave man. He led an army of knights and battled bravely." Christa tilted her head and smiled naively. "I would have thought taking a hostage would have been easy for him. It would be nothing. Unless he's been telling us tall tales?"

A wave of rage moved through the townspeople. Sergei, the owner of the hotel, stood up in indignation. "Such impertinence!"

"The Count of Estonia comes from a family of heroes! Eulis follows in their footsteps as a brave warrior. Some false religious leader is nothing to him. Isn't that right, Sir Eulis?"

"Oh? Well yes, Sergei." Eulis had been zoned out, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he'd just been called a liar, but he was now back in the conversation. The locals in the room were all furiously nodding their heads and looking at him. "Well, yes, I mean, I'm very interested in the countess' suggestion. Thank you for your concern, Father Nightroad, but I have a fair

knowledge of fighting. You do not need to worry."

"Well then, it's decided!" Christa clapped her hands and exclaimed in delight. "Now everyone will get what they want. The count gets his castle back. The priests get Cherubim. And I get my husband... Oh, Rudolph. The countess trailed off, lost in thoughts of a reunion with her husband. She pushed her hands to her breast and sighed sadly. "I need to see him. My beloved Rudolph. I wonder what you're doing now?"

While Christa was talking to herself, the townspeople gathered around Eulis, talking excitedly together. Eulis was smiling at all the kind encouragement he was receiving. But there was something false about it.

Abel sighed as he looked at the youth's facade. "Well. Shall we do this?"

It was true that the struggling New Vatican was utterly reliant on Alfonso. If they took him as hostage, it would create disorder within the ranks. However, could Eulis apprehend Alfonso? Would it be too difficult to take the enemy leader while within enemy territory?

"What do you think, Father Tres?" Abel asked his colleague.

"The risk is too great." Father Tres shook his head but his expression was blank, as always. "But if there are no other options, then we have no choice but to follow this course of action... The Department of the Inquisition will be pushing for Duchess of Milan's execution as we speak. There is no time for hesitation."

"You're right." Abel said forlornly. He thought of her in Rome and sighed. Alone in a cold, dark cell. She wasn't a physically strong woman. Abel wondered if she was all right. He hoped that she was looking after herself.

There was no other choice. They had to try Countess Anhalt's plan.

"Objection!" Professor was calm but firm. He eyed the judges, daring them to challenge him. "I have grave doubts on the reliability of the prosecution. Your Honor, I would like you to rethink the relevance of the facts."

"The defense's objection is overruled."

The young judge, Cardinal Carione, shook his head. This cardinal was well known as a devout follower of Francesco. That he was residing as judge was not in Caterina's favor. "There is sufficient proof of the reliability of the prosecution's evidence. Would the defense please present counter-evidence."

"Then I would like to question the officer of the Department of the Inquisition. Exhibit A: a signature on a list of participants of New Vatican. There is no evidence that this list is genuine."

Professor didn't look to the judge or the prosecution. He looked at the jury. The jury was made up of twelve cardinals, all dressed in scarlet clerical garments. He held out his arms to ask for their sympathy. "I have seen the findings of the DNA and handwriting analysis, and the radio-immunological assessment.

However, there are problems with the conclusions! This cannot be considered proof that the accused has a connection with New Vatican. This is only proof of doubt. There is no other physical evidence that the accused collaborated with New Vatican. I would like the jury to bear that in mind."

But despite the eloquent scientific explanation, this was clearly not enough to garner the jury's sympathies.

"Your Honor," the calm woman of the prosecution was next to interrupt the proceedings. "The prosecution would like to add four further pieces of evidence to exhibit A. May I?"

"You may. Are they here now, Sister Paula?"

"Yes." Sister Paula took out several files from a folder and handed them out to the judge and jury. Finally, she walked toward the defense's bench. "Master Wordsworth." With insipid politeness, she offered the file.

Silently, Professor took it and glanced over it.

Paula returned to the prosecution bench and started talking: "This was sent to the Department of the Inquisition by an anonymous member of the Ministry of Holy Affairs. It is a confidential internal document, but it is from the pen of the accused, Cardinal Sforza. It has been labeled as Top Secret. They are orders sent from Cardinal Sforza to the heretic, Father Vaclav Havel, during the Brno uprising."

Ripples of shock were audible from the jury. Sealed in the files were several letters addressed to the traitor Havel. The contents were fragmentary, but the main subject pertained to orders for Havel to seize new weapons of the church for New Vatican. Most of the jury would know the handwriting by sight.

"Duchess of Milan, is this not your hand?" With perfect timing, Paula turned the jury's attention to the beautiful woman sat in the dock. "You used your subordinate, Havel, to aid the uprising of New Vatican. Do you deny supporting the abduction of His Holiness?"

"Of course this is not true."

It was not Caterina who defended herself. The beauty in the dock maintained her silence. Professor stood up from the lawyer's desk to defend his leader. "Sister Paula, what do you mean to achieve by bringing such a thing into the court? This is sabotaging the trial by bringing such ridiculous evidence and theatrics. I would like to raise a strong objection."

"Unfortunately for you, it is not you who gets to decide what evidence is admissible, Master Wordsworth."

Professor's objection was valid, but the "Lady of Death" didn't budge an inch. Her gaze was as cold as death itself.

The poker face of the Albion aristocracy in challenging situations was well-established—so, Professor's expression betrayed nothing. However, this silence and lack of emotion did not mean he, or his mistress, were not feeling defeated.

"I'm sorry, Your Eminence." Professor looked serious as he turned to the accused. His beloved pipe still in his mouth, he whispered to his mistress: "We seem to be trapped."

"We are not the only ones who are trapped." Caterina coughed. She looked ill, but her eyes hadn't lost their spark. Her gaze was sharp, and she was ready to face her opponents. "We are all trapped, the whole of the Vatican, including the Department of the Inquisition. Still, these backhanded tactics are a mistake. Their sly ways are not sufficient."

"Order! Order!"

The sound of the judge's gavel demanded silence. The courtroom had descended into chaos and flurry at the submission of this new piece of evidence.

"Does anyone have any counter-evidence to this new exhibit?"

"No." Professor may have been the brains of Rome, but he wasn't a miracle worker. There was nothing he could do. The timing of the evidence was perfect, the contents excellent... It was splendid. Sister Paula was an able adversary who had read the feeling of the room and even used the Department of the Inquisition to her own end.

"We were ready for a tough battle, but this is worse than I expected. I wonder when we can expect the others back from Tallinn?" Professor whispered.

Caterina didn't answer; she just continued to stare out the window.

The snowfall had gotten worse. It was always cold during Christmastime, but this year's winter had been unusually fierce. Caterina wondered if they were keeping themselves warm.

"That concludes the statement for the prosecution."

Once again, the judge's gavel hit the bench. Cardinal Carione's voice echoed in the court room: "The accused, Caterina Sforza, will be sentenced at this time next week. Court is adjourned for today!"

"This is unusual, you coming here." The convict smirked from behind the bullet-proof glass as he picked at his ear. He twisted his mouth into a strange smile. "How many years have you been working?"

"*I don't know*," a cold voice was the only thing to meet the convict's question. The speaker's cassock was done up tight around his neck. He seemed to possess enough latent energy that he

could break a finger by just touching it. *"This time, the request is not from Duchess of Milan. Professor sends this message. He does not have the power to reduce your sentence, but if you don't take this job or if you take it and fail, then you will never leave this place."*

"Harsh. I don't really have a choice." The convict sighed heavily. He pulled his finger out of his ear and was now inspecting the orange wax stuck to the end of it. He smiled. "I have to get out of here. I have a woman waiting for me on the outside. A real good girl."

"I see."

For a second, a shadow passed over the visitor's face. It was only for a second though; immediately, his face returned to its typically stoic expression. The young man nodded, his blonde hair moving as his head did. He picked up his metal rod and stood up. *"Well, when you're ready."*

"Sure... but more importantly..." The convict, Leon Garcia de Asturias, raised his eyebrows. While he rubbed the marks on his arms where the shackles had been, he looked up into his visitor's face. "How about your injuries? I heard that you had not gotten out of bed for half a year?"

"Ah, yes, about that..." The visitor started to move the metal rod gently. Immediately, the bullet-proof glass that had separated them lay in shambles on the floor.

"As you can see, there are no lingering problems." Dispatch Officer Father Hugue de Watteau smiled.

III

"I have not been crushed by anything that has happened so far," he proclaimed firmly.

In the counts former office, which was now being used by New Vatican, Alfonso d'Este looked into the faces of the priests lined up.

Whilst they had been immersed in the meeting, the sun had come up. The snow was stopping, and through a break in the clouds, brilliant sunlight shone. The light reflected off the fresh snow, making the whole world seem to shine like silver. The priest looked up at the light, a burning defiance in his eyes, as if he had the gall to challenge God himself. "I follow the will of God. Of course the heavens will shine on us. Is that not right?"

"Yes, Your Holiness." Heidrich nodded. He was still wrapped in bandages, after sustaining injuries at the battle of Brno. He was a famous soldier, known for wielding swords in both hands. He adjusted the two large swords on his back and nodded with a confidence that bordered on fever. "The proof is that I escaped from Brno safe, despite being surrounded. The rotten scum in Rome will be wiped out if it's God's will."

"It is as my brother says, Your Holiness!" Friedrich, a priest, spoke up in agreement of Heidrich. He wore long whips that were attached to his belt on both sides. He clenched his fist and, turning to his master and allies, raised his voice to spur them on: "When spring comes, we will leave this rural town and head north. We have heard that there are considerable numbers of men who are opposed to the tyranny of the Vatican. We will work with them and bide our time."

"Until we are able to fight again," Alfonso commented. He looked out at one of the castle gardens and nodded.

This snow was their ally. The church's forces had not been able to track them down because of it. Using this to their advantage, they had regained their strength and were waiting for the time when they were strong enough again. The Vatican's authority was by no means firm. There were many cracks in which they could hide.

"Your Holiness, I'm sorry to disturb you when you're busy..." From behind, a monk called for his attention. "There are some men here who urgently need to speak to you."

When Alfonso looked around, he saw that there were several people at the doorway to the office — many townspeople, wrapped up against the cold. With them, they carried two coffins.

"What are the caskets for?" Friedrich eyed the boxes suspiciously. He took a few steps

forward and looked in.

"No, you mustn't," the largest of the townsfolk hurriedly recommended. It was Sergei, the owner of the town's hotel. "They are in a very bad state. I would recommend that you do not look."

However, his warning was ignored. The priest bent down and easily lifted the lid with one hand. Immediately he screwed his face up. "Wh-what is this?!"

Inside the coffin was a corpse. Of course, just any corpse wouldn't catch Friedrich off-guard. The corpse was completely wrapped in bandages, with not a single section of skin showing, and the bandages themselves were covered in blood.

"What is with this body?!"

"It's... it's the body of the monk," Sergei answered. He closed the lid again and continued. "This is Alois and Richter... We found them dead last night in the street."

"WHAT?"

They were being told that their friends were dead. The blood ran out of the priests' faces. But both men had been well last night. They had gone out to patrol the town, but they had returned as corpses.

"It is very difficult to say this, but they must have been murdered by one of the townsmen." Sergei timidly offered an explanation: "Last night, I heard yelling outside my hotel. When I went to look, there were several men in the streets, fighting. I ran out as quickly as I could, but I was too late."

"How? Two of our monks..." Alfonso said, his voice quivering with anger. His vision blurred in rage. He knew that there had been unrest among the locals, but this was the first time there had been casualties. And it was clear that something considerably violent had occurred. "The names of their killers? Do you know where they are?" Alfonso asked.

"Yes... In fact we caught one of them. Shall we bring him to you?"

"Yes! Now!"

Sergei didn't have to be ordered. From among the small group of townsfolk, a young man in chains was pushed forward.

"So this is him..." Alfonso looked down with contempt at the man. He was covered in bruises and looked pitiful. But Alfonso was surprised when he looked into the man's face. "It's the count! You disappeared very quickly from the castle. We've been worried. It's not very polite to neglect your guests," Alfonso chided.

"Guests? You're nothing but thieves! And disgusting heretics!" The count looked up at Alfonso. His face was not only bruised but covered in blood and dirt. "Well, the master of the house has returned. So get out!"

"I'm sorry, but we can't do that. It's still snowing. We're not moving until spring. Anyway, are you the man who killed these two? Killing men of the cloth is a serious crime, you know that, right?" Alfonso was playing with Eulis.

"Men of the cloth? They looked like heretics to me!"

It was a precarious situation for the count, but he was giving the bluff his all. He wasn't letting up, and his face turned paler as he screamed: "Soon, you will be annihilated! The church will come here. Your time on this earth will be short!"

"I'm sorry, Count. The church won't find us here. And if they do find where we are, they won't have enough time to send troops here. As long as we are here, our safety is secure."

"Safety? You're so sure of yourself." The count curled his lips. It was a strange face to pull, somewhere between laughter and tears. His voice still trembled though. "Tallinn isn't as safe as you think it is. Do you really think that I did nothing between your attack and the fall of the castle?"

"What do you mean?" Alfonso was now no longer in the mood to ridicule Eulis. He looked down at the sickly man. "What are you telling me?"

Eulis didn't answer. Perhaps he was sulking or had lost his nerve. Either way, he glared straight back at Alfonso, completely silent.

Alfonso nodded to Friedrich. "Bring him here, Friedrich."

"Sir." The tuned soldier quickly grabbed the young count's arms. With some force, he dragged him over to where Alfonso was standing.

"I'll ask you again. What have you done? Perhaps you know something that I should?" Alfonso repeated his question.

"I..." Eulis looked over his shoulder to the townspeople who had brought him in. Alfonso was about to repeat himself again but —

"Wait," a calm voice interrupted. It was one of the priests who had been watching Eulis. The tuned soldier walked up to the young count, his face grim. "I suggest you don't move. What are you hiding?"

Alfonso was taken aback. Eulis had been hiding something in his sleeve. And that would also explain why the townsfolk who had brought him here were looking so anxious.

"Your Holiness, stand back!"

"Combat Open."

Friedrich pushed his leader back just as one of the coffins burst open in flames. The bandaged corpses jumped out of the coffins and bullets skimmed the top of Alfonso's head.

"The enemy!"

"Take the false clergy!" The small room was suddenly full of screams, gunshots, and clashing swords. The two corpses had jumped out of their coffins and run toward Alfonso. Their bloody bandages unraveling, Abel and Tres charged.

"We won't let you!"

"Get back, heretic scum!"

However, two tuned soldiers — one wielding two whips, the other wielding two swords — stood in their way.

"Crap. Eulis! Quickly! Get Cardinal d'Este!" Abel yelled as he narrowly avoided the swords aimed at his body. A few strands of blonde hair fell to the floor, as he fired shots in return. But the bullets were deflected by the sword. Not one hit its target. Tres was locked in a ferocious battle too, so Abel couldn't rely on him for help. Abel yelled again. "What are you waiting for, Eulis?! Quickly! Get Cardinal d'Este!"

"Ah, oh, yes. . ." Finally, Eulis seemed to remember his role in this operation. He took off the shackles and took out a small gun that he had concealed in his sleeve. Fortunately, the other New Vatican followers had scattered in the confusion. The townsfolk were guarding the room. There was a strange tension between Eulis and the false Pope. The young count raised his gun. "Do-don't move, heretic!" His voice trembled, along with the hand holding the gun. He was so pale, one might think that the gun was aimed at himself. "Al-Alfonso d'Este, we are taking you hostage. Don't try anything stupid! Or I'll shoot!" Eulis threatened.

"Shoot? Me? Could you?" Alfonso didn't seem to be scared that he was looking down the barrel of a gun. He looked into the eyes of the count. Cold sweat was running down the aristocrat's face. The New Vatican Pope slowly shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I can tell you, you couldn't do that. Eulis Ruutel... You could not defeat me.

"Ngh."

Alfonso's voice was full of confidence. When Eulis took a step forward to overwhelm Alfonso, Alfonso grabbed the gun with his wrinkled fingers. He didn't just grab it. He made it so that Eulis couldn't pull the trigger. He then skillfully manipulated it out of his hand.

"What are you doing? Count?!" Abel screamed at Eulis. While avoiding the sword thrusts, he was watching the scene unfold. Eulis still didn't move, though.

"I was chosen to lead, Count," Alfonso spoke calmly and authoritatively to the man from whom he had taken the gun. "So many people have tried to hurt me. But God has punished them. It is the only way things can happen, Count of Estonia."

"Ngh... ngh!"

Without hesitation, he pulled the trigger. A slew of bullets flew at Eulis. He closed his eyes. However, the bullets never reached him.

"Tre-Tres!"

With a quick leap, Tres had pushed Eulis to the ground. The bullets hit his right leg. Tres

aimed his M13 at the false Pope, who was already taking aim again.

"Too slow!" Friedrich screamed. A black light came from his fingers. The whip wrapped around the M13. Nevertheless, Tres still tried to shoot at Alfonso.

"Your Holiness, are you okay?!"

It was then that the door to the office was kicked down, and guards rushed into the room. The priests quickly stood between their Pope and the attackers. There was no way that they would be able to take Alfonso now.

"We failed!" Abel yelled. He was still firing as he looked around for an escape route. He ran to the desk where Eulis was.

Eulis pushed a concealed button, and the floor at their feet opened up, revealing a dark hole. It the very same escape route that Eulis had used a week ago.

"The plan failed. Everyone run!"

Abel kicked the desk over to use as a shield. To buy their friends time, they fired rapidly toward their enemies.

Fifteen-thousand feet above the Baltic Sea...

At an altitude well over what was normally possible, the morning passed by quietly. AX member Kate Scott looked into the blue stratosphere. She was trying to be calm. This was her favorite place for thinking up new herbal tea recipes.

However, this morning she wasn't in the mood.

"Is there still no word from Cardinal Borgia? They are an hour late already. Could something have happened?" Kate was talking to Antonio over the radio.

"It is certainly strange that we haven't heard from Abel or Iqus. Something may very well have happened." Antonio's voice was grim. He had uncharacteristically not cracked a single joke. *"Perhaps the plan was never feasible. Could Abel Nightroad have fallen in Tallinn? Goodbye, my brother. I will never be able to forget you."*

"Please don't talk like that." Now that Antonio was slipping back into his normal ways, Kate was furious. Her voice betrayed her anger. *"If you have time to be speaking like that, then you can find out if they're safe or not! If something has happened to them, then it will be the end for Caterina as well."*

"I know that." Antonio tried to protest against the sister's abuse. Unfortunately, Kate didn't hear what he said. A loud noise drowned him out.

"Huh? Cardinal Borgia? What's going on? Cardinal?"

Kate checked the connection. But the equipment didn't indicate that there was anything unusual.

"What is it? Is the signal bad?"

Kate wondered if Cardinal Borgia had pushed the wrong button or something. But still she had a bad feeling about it.

"Could it be?"

Kate's instinct was telling her something. She twisted the dials to match the Vatican's exclusive channel. She couldn't understand what was being said. But when the electric filter kicked in, Kate could make out words.

"Top secret orders. This is being issued by the Department of Inquisition. The Eighth Special Forces, Group B, is to head north. When the Inquisition officer Brother Matthaios arrives, the troops will move out. Arrival in Tallinn is expected at twenty-four hundred."

"Oh God," Kate muttered.

V

"This is bad. I mean really bad." The young man scratched at his disheveled hair. He

looked around the grim faces of the men in the attic of the hotel. "Do you know how bad this is? Now they know we're here. We won't be able to leave!" Antonio exclaimed. There was no arguing. Everyone knew it. Because of their failure, the streets were now full of New Vatican agents, searching for them. They were going door to door, looking for the townspeople and AX members who had fled the office that morning.

"I shouldn't have let you lot talk me into it," Eulis said gloomily as he peaked out of a crack in the curtains. He looked down at the soldiers and armored vehicles that were moving up and down the street. "It's only a matter of time before they find us! They're going to make us pay for what we did!" Eulis spat out.

"You agreed with the plan before we went, Count of Estonia. You cannot accuse us," Tres replied. His voice was monotonous and metallic. He was applying emergency treatment to his wounded right leg. He looked up momentarily to peer at Eulis. "The reason that the plan failed was that you let the chance we had to secure Alfonso d'Este go. You are responsible for the failure. Your psychological weakness."

"Psychological weakness? Are you saying that I have a problem?"

"Affirmative."

Eulis fell silent. The mechanical soldier's reply had been harsh.

"You abandoned your responsibility in the face of danger. And that was why the plan failed," Tres didn't relent.

"You... you..." Eulis was livid. He reflexively reached for the rapier at his hip. As soon as his hand found the handle though, he hesitated and opened and closed his hand around it.

Tres, on the other hand, stared at Eulis. He had no intention of apologizing for what he said.

"Come." Abel sighed. This wasn't going to accomplish anything. He thought that he should calm the situation down, but...

"Someone! *Anyone!*"

Along with a small electric crackle, there was a woman's voice. It was an emergency call from the *Iron Maiden*, which was stationed about fifteen-thousand feet above Tallinn. Abel pushed the headphones to his ear. "What's happened, Kate?" Abel was disconcerted by the tone in Kate's voice. "Has something happened up there?"

"*The Department of Inquisition.*"

There was quite a lot of disturbance in the signal because she was fifteen-thousand feet away. However, there was more disturbance in the audio feed than Abel expected.

"*The Department of Inquisition is acting. Three ships, including the Jahoel, are heading for Tallinn!*"

"What?!" Abel tensed at this unexpected revelation. He looked up at Tres.

They had carefully slipped under the RADAR of several countries to get here. That was why it had taken three days to arrive in Tallinn. How could they have been traced?!

"*I've intercepted a secret communications of the church. It sounds like they will be here around midnight tonight. You need to pull back straight away!*"

"Tonight." Abel choked. His throat was dry. They only had fourteen hours!

"What's the matter?" Eulis asked. He could see that the priests were uneasy. He seemed to have forgotten his earlier rage.

"What happened?"

"The Department of Inquisition is coming here, after us," Abel said, resigned; he closed his eyes as he continued: "They'll be here tonight."

"What?!"

All of the townsfolk went pale. The stories about the Department of Inquisition had reached even these remote areas. If they found the remnants of New Vatican here, then that would be the end. A battle would begin that would engulf the town and all its residents.

"What are you going to do?" Unsurprisingly, it was Eulis who screamed hysterically at the AX Agents above the chatter. "This is all your fault! If they come, then it's the end for Tallinn!"

Abel bit down on his lip as he took the verbal assault. Even Tres was silent now. Eulis was

right. It was the end for Tallinn. Neither the Department of the Inquisition nor New Vatican would care that innocent citizens would be caught up in the fighting. No matter who won, the streets of Tallinn would be littered with corpses, either way.

All the hopes of AX finding Cherubim and saving Caterina were dashed. There was no way they could re-enter the castle and capture Cherubim before the Department of the Inquisition arrived in Tallinn. The only option left was to return to Rome and rescue Caterina, but the chances of that happening were very low.

They were defeated.

It seemed only destruction and slaughter loomed on the horizon. The silence in the room was so intense, its inhabitants could almost feel the weight of it pushing down on them.

"Abel, this may be a very slim chance..."

There was one person in the room, though, who hadn't lost hope yet: Antonio Borgia. The Bishop of Valencia scratched his head and laid out a map on the desk.

"We wait for the battle and then we sneak back into the castle. While New Vatican and the Department of the Inquisition are caught up with each other, we'll take what we want!"

"Antonio, I don't think that would work. We might get what we want, but what about the residents of this town?" Abel nibbled on his lip as he considered the townspeople. He looked over at them and shook his head. "If a battle begins, a lot of people will be caught up in it and will die... We should leave here; at least we might attract the Department of the Inquisition away."

"Even if they do follow us, they'll still notice New Vatican's presence here. It'll still mean the end for this town. And I have thought about their safety. They don't have to be caught up in this. Why don't they all evacuate the city?"

"Evacuate?" Eulis raised an eyebrow. The mountains surrounding Tallinn were covered in snow. It would be like sentencing the three thousand residents to death.

However, the smile on Antonio's face was like that of the snake who had convinced Eve to eat fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. He pointed at the map and grinned. "Here. Count's Oilshell mountain... They could hide here until tomorrow morning."

"Hah?!" The townsfolk all gasped in unison. They started muttering excitedly.

The tunnel was deep underground. It would easily fit all three thousand residents. And also, it would shelter them from the harsh cold above ground. They could make it! With food, they might even be able to last more than one night. Hope filled the faces of the townsfolk. It was preferable to being caught up between two warring factions.

"How would that work?" Eulis muttered, pouring a dampener on the fresh hope. He assessed the map. "Are you people thinking straight? It's twenty-five miles to the mountain. We have sick and elderly people. It won't be possible to move everyone out without New Vatican noticing. Who could even consider such a foolish plan?!"

Eulis pointed out the crack in the curtains to indicate the mountain range. It soared beautifully high into the sky. It would indeed be difficult to persuade three thousand people to get up and move there.

"That's for you to work out, Eulis — sorry, Count of Estonia." Abel looked straight at Eulis. He carefully enunciated each word to give it the force it deserved. "You are the only one who will be able to persuade them and lead them."

"Give me a break! I'm pathetic. You must be able to see that! I can't do anything!"

"You won't know until you try, right? This is a big job, but you have the knowledge and the people's love. I think you have a winning chance." Abel was patient.

All eyes were on the young count. The townsfolk in the room were holding their breath. But Eulis shook his head, adamant. "I can't do it. I'm a pathetic weakling. As soon as I even hear the sound of a gunshot, I'm like a sitting duck. That whole story where I stayed bravely with the knights — that was all a lie... all of it."

Eulis bent over and buried his head in his hands. His voice was disappearing into a little groan. "I was scared while everyone fought. I ran. I ran away alone. I abandoned all the knights who were bravely fighting for our country. And I ran. Some leader for Estonia! I'm just a

coward!" Eulis trembled with regret and fear.

He was pitiful, but Abel wasn't going to spare him. "And now even, you're calling yourself a coward... "Abel was polite but there was an unusual strictness in his tone. He grabbed Eulis' shoulders and forced him to look up at him. "But still we have to take a chance... You have to lead them out!"

"NO!" Eulis screamed hysterically. "I can't do it! I won't do it! Someone else, someone stronger..."

He wasn't allowed to finish. A huge slap sent him flying to the floor. Eulis was caught unawares. Silently, he looked down at the floor panels.

"You really are pathetic." Abel looked down at Eulis as he quietly lowered his hands. Behind his glasses, his eyes shone cold. His expression was so stiff that he looked almost inhuman. "But we do not have time to continue this. Even as we speak, someone we love dearly is facing a death sentence. Fine. We won't ask you to do anything more," Abel spat out. He then turned back to his friends. "Antonio, Tres: I want you to organize the escape. It may be difficult for you to obtain the town's cooperation, but it is far better than relying on some pathetic weakling."

"Hey!"

There was a scream from behind the priest. When Abel turned around, a fist came straight at him. The force sent him tumbling to the floor.

"Shut up, you stupid priest!"

It wasn't the count who had stood up to take revenge for the abuse. Eulis was still lying on the floor. It was the townsfolk who were standing around to defend his honor.

"How dare you think you can say what you want to him?! You know nothing about the count!" Sergei screamed at the priest. His cheeks were flushed. "The count is always thinking about us. He's never been strong but he studied hard, and little by little, he's worked to improve our lives. He may have his flaws, but no one can call him a coward!"

Sergei's sermon raised muttered agreements from the other townsfolk. They set upon kicking the fallen priest.

Eulis protested. "Ple-please..."

He had let them all down this morning. He had been overwhelmed by an old man. Eulis couldn't understand how they "Ye-yes." Christa looked upset. "If this turns into a battle, what will happen to my husband? My poor Rudolph may be killed as a heretic."

"Don't worry yourself. Abel will enter the castle before the fighting gets too fierce. He'll also look for your husband. Don't worry. Abel will find him."

Antonio's kind words were empty, though. Abel might not have the time when he was in enemy territory to look for Rudolph. Even if he did, the chances of finding him safe were slim. Antonio knew this. But Christa didn't seem to realize, and she stopped frowning a little.

"Really? I'll put my faith in Father Nightroad. I know that he'll be able to rescue my husband."

"Of course. So please don't worry." Antonio smiled to ease her. She left the room, looking a little more relaxed. When she had left, Antonio turned his attention back to the evacuation operation with a troubled expression.

There was something bothering him. He turned back around to look at the door through which she just left.

Antonio stood for a while, immersed in his own thoughts.

"Forty pounds of plastic bullets please." The young priest put the shopping basket on the counter. "I'd also like enough canned and nonperishable food to last for four days. I'd also like a plane capable of taking off in the snow."

"Have you seen the board?"

The shops were quiet. Looking up from the newspaper, Romas Quaranta eyed the foreign looking youth.

"I don't read Lithuanian. What's written?"

"Quaranta fresh sea food. Good and cheap. Will deliver within Vilnius.' That's right. If it isn't fresh, I don't sell it. I don't have cans or bullets or anything like that. Look somewhere else," the old man said and then turned back to the newspaper. He was ready to pull out the pistol in his pocket if required. But he watched the priest reflected in the mirror near his foot and wondered what the strange man was up to. He was disturbed from his thoughts by a thick accented voice.

"Hey, don't be so cold, old man."

"You..."

A giant, over six-feet tall, knocked the gun out of Romas' hand. The man grinned. "You stopped running your store to become a fishmonger? Getting old?"

"Garcia?!" Romas' jaw dropped. Then, he quickly became ecstatic. He beat on the chest of the giant. "It's been such a long time! What's with this look? Priest garments really don't suit you. What happened to the Hispanic Army?"

"I quit. Personal reasons." The giant, Leon Garcia de Asturias, pulled a face. It was only for an instant, though. He patted the old gun seller on the back and laughed. "It's been three years. You look well."

"You never sent a single letter," the old man chided affectionately.

It made Leon grimace a little. He brought the topic back to his main purpose quickly. "There're lots of things I want to tell you, but I don't have time. Can you get the stuff for me?"

"Who do you think I am? Give me five minutes. But a plane that can land on snow? Where is the battle this time?"

"I can only say it's up north. Top secret."

"North, ay?" Leon's old friend shook his head a little, resigned, but then he seemed to remember something. "North... You don't mean Estonia, do you?"

"How do you know, old man?"

"If I were you, I wouldn't go anywhere near that place. It's no good up there." Romas frowned as he pulled the order from under the floorboards. "You know those idiots who caused the disturbance at Brno are there, right? The stragglers fled to Estonia. There're going to be a lot of dangerous types hanging round there now."

"Dangerous types?"

The old man nodded and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Yesterday, some people said three airships set off north. They'll be going to crush what's left."

Leon tensed a little when he heard this. "Make sure the ship is full of fuel; I'm going right away." He quickly picked up the paper bags that Romas had placed on the counter.

Romas eyed the giant.

"A little quicker. I'm in a hurry."

Judgment Day

Flee ye, turn back, dwell deep, o inhabitants of Dedan;
for I will bring the calamity of Esau upon him, the time I will visit him.

—Jeremiah 49:8

I

"Are you here, Cherubim?" Alfonso quietly asked. He was in what once had been the count's room. On one of the walls of the study were bookshelves. Crammed in between those was an image of the Virgin and Child.

With his head bowed down in front of the picture, a dry voice called out: "The

representative of God asks you, the guardian of knowledge: How many of the true faith have been martyred?"

The answer came immediately. The voice was destitute. "Nine-hundred and twenty-nine, Your Holiness."

A person had appeared. He was standing behind Alfonso. The man stared into space with his pale eyes; it looked like he was reading writing in the sky. He started to read names as if it were a list. "Those who have been martyred as of today, December twenty-fourth, are as follows... From the monastery of Kassel: Brothers Alois Reuen, Otto Edoardo, Johan Batholemew, Karl Fritz, Adam Rust..."

Alfonso didn't know when the list of names might stop. He looked up to heavens and let out a deep sigh.

"Oh Lord, why?" He looked at the image of the Madonna and pleaded. "Why do you test us so? Why have you called so many of the faithful back to you? Why have you thrice sent those demons to us? We have already been pushed to this harsh northern climate. Are you not satisfied that our faith has been sufficient?"

Alfonso hung his head as he spoke, trying to understand why they had been challenged so much. He closed his eyes and opened his ears, but no answer came from the heavens. The marble Madonna and her beautiful child just kept smiling down at him. The only sound that came was that of the snowstorm, which had been raging since this morning.

"So this is the wonderment... The man-made information dwarf, Cherubim?"

Alfonso quickly raised his head. What was that? Where had it come from him?

The room was entirely deserted. He was the only person here. All of the priests should have been in the cathedral getting ready for midnight mass.

"Oh dear, did I surprise you?"

The same gentle voice chided Alfonso. It was a female voice. It almost sounded like a mother, reading a story to her child.

The voice echoed off the ceiling, sounding vindictive: *"And this is what I am to expect from the man who flew a flag against Rome? Did you miscalculate the situation? Your dream of crushing AX and the Vatican is still but a dream."*

"Who are you?!" Alfonso twisted round, searching in the dim corners of the room for something. "Are you a man? Or a demon! Don't hide! Show yourself!"

"I am no demon. I am on your side, Alfonso d'Este."

However, no female appeared in the room. It was a disembodied voice, resounding off the walls of the room.

"My name is Helga. Helga von Vogelweide. I am Rank 8-3 of the Rosenkruez Orden, named Ice Witch. I have come to warn you that you are in danger."

"The Orden?!"

Hearing this name, Alfonso had frowned, doubtful. It was the terrorist group who had requested the destruction of Rome. But since their failure at Rome, he had not once spoken with the agent who went by the name of Kampffer. During the uprising in Rome, Alfonso had tried to contact him to no avail. Why were they here now?!

"Are you one of Kampffer's men?!"

"Yes, something like that." For a moment, the woman's voice seemed pained. Her next words returned to her normal tone of superiority: *"This does not matter now, Alfonso. There is a great calamity coming. Do you know that the AX Agents who came this morning are conspiring?"*

"Conspiring?"

"Yes." Ice Witch snorted a little. It reminded Alfonso of a cat, playing with a mouse. *"The people of this town who were planning to use you as a hostage. . . Those three hundred citizens of Tallinn? They have already left now... Do you think they have just disappeared?"*

When Alfonso frowned as the windows to the study were flung open by some unseen force, causing the cold air and the snow to flood into the room.

"They have left the city and are heading for the mountains. Those Roman dogs intend to evacuate the town and launch a major offensive against us. They intend to kill all those of the true faith."

"WHAT?!" Alfonso almost choked on the cold air that was beating on his face. His eyes wide with panic, he ran to the open window and looked down. It was Christmas Eve, but there was not a single light on in the snow-covered town, and the streets were deathly silent. In the distance, Alfonso could just about make out small points of light moving in the direction of the mountains. They were torches leading the people away from town.

"Without the residents of this town as a human shield, the Vatican will be able to unleash their full force. They probably intend to exterminate you all."

Alfonso couldn't breathe.

Ice Witch chuckled. *"Alfonso, are you going to sit there and wait for your death? Or. . ."*

II

"Don't you think it's strange, Antonio?" Everything was quiet. From the ceiling, the electric light lit the empty corridor. As he snuck out of the deserted bathroom, Abel looked around carefully. He muttered to his friend from under his hood.

"What's strange?" Antonio said.

"Hmm, something doesn't seem quite right," Abel replied.

Abel and Antonio were dressed in monk's habits.

Antonio looked up and down the dirty corridor and combed his long hair with his fingers. "Seriously, what's going on?! How can one of the Vatican's most wanted be crawling round in sewers?" Antonio grumbled.

"We didn't have much choice! There was no other way in. You were the one who wanted to come! If you've got a problem, then you can just go with the others to the mountain," Abel rebuked Antonio. He didn't take his attention off their bearing, though. As he looked around, he lowered his voice a little. "Anyway, don't you think the castle is strangely empty? When we here this morning, the place was full of New Vatican."

"Yeah, you're right." Antonio looked up and down. He had to have it pointed out before he noticed it. Eulis had told them about this way into the castle. They hadn't seen signs of anyone, though. As only half a day had passed since they had been in the castle, the AX Agents had expected New Vatican to be even more wary. Were they just being careless?

"Perhaps they're all at mass? It is Christmas Eve tonight."

"I suppose."

Abel nodded his agreement as he squinted down the dark corridor. It was certainly possible, considering the depth of Alfonso's religious passion. It would explain why there was no one in the castle. But he couldn't shake the vague foreboding he felt.

"Let's not worry too much about it. It's a good thing for us. Anyway, there was something I wanted to ask you, Abel," Antonio said. Obviously, Antonio didn't have the same bad feeling about this that Abel did. He just kept talking. "Right, so Master Wordsworth's choice... It was to either break into the Lateran Palace or find Cherubim. Why did he choose Tallinn? If it had been you, I bet you would have chosen to just save Duchess of Milan directly, am I right?"

"There are things more important to Caterina than her life."

The first corridor led then to another corridor, which took them to an inner garden. The courtyard was overshadowed by tall buildings. The snow that had fallen here had frozen into ice, making it look like a garden of glass. Abel was silent for a moment as he carefully proceeded. Finally he spoke again: "She has made many sacrifices for that position. After obtaining such an important power... She won't want to lose it."

"More important than her own life?" Antonio probably hadn't noticed the slight resonance of pity in Abel's voice. He shrugged his shoulders as if they were just having a chat over coffee. "She has more lust for power than I expected. Seeing how hard she worked to be a cardinal, I wonder if there is something specific she wants."

Abel frowned. Now that they had lost Havel, he was the only one in AX who *knew*. It was something that couldn't be spoken about. Shaking his head, he decided that the conversation

needed to be diverted toward another direction.

"I don't really know anything about that. More importantly, do you know the face of this Cherubim? This might be our last chance. It would be terrible if I saw him but didn't realize that it was him."

"Oh, don't worry about it. You really do like to worry, don't you, Abel? My dear, sweet friend," Antonio replied. He wasn't tense in the slightest. "I've seen him once from afar but I remember his face perfectly. I have a great memory."

It was then that a guard stepped out of the shadow of the pillar and questioned them. "What are you two doing here?" It was a single soldier who had probably come outside to have a smoke and look at the snow. He was now eyeing Abel and Antonio suspiciously. "All the monks are gathered in the tower... You... you...?!"

It seemed that the guard had remembered Abel being involved in the disruption this morning. He immediately raised his gun. Abel also hurriedly reached for his hand gun, but...

"OW." Suddenly something pushed him from behind. Underneath his feet, the cobbles were icy and slippery. He tottered for a moment before falling forward. "AAAAAAHHHHH!"

The soldier was about to squeeze the trigger, but Abel was now careening toward him. Abel hit him head on, and the two of them collapsed on the paving stones, a tangled mess of limbs.

"Good work, Abel!" Antonio swiftly ran over and picked up the gun that the soldier had dropped during his fall and aimed it straight at the man's head. Abel still wasn't quite sure what had happened.

"Pretty careless of you, though..." Antonio addressed the soldier who was lying on the ground. "Put your hands on your head. If you make any sudden movements, I'll shoot. Abel, are you all right?"

"A-A-A-ANTONIO! Did you just use me as a human shield?!" Abel screamed indignantly. "You were trying to save yourself!"

"Oh no, my friend. It was all just part of my cunning plan to save you."

Antonio grinned and patted his "friend" on the back. "You don't have to thank me; we're friends after all."

Abel had had his doubts about bringing Antonio with him, but it had paid off this time. He decided to leave it alone for once. He looked down at the soldier, who now had both his hands on his head.

"I wonder if you could tell us? There're not many people here. Where is everyone? Are they in the cathedral?"

"They went outside." The soldier gulped. He was probably still coming to terms with the situation. "I don't know the full details, but they were saying that the townspeople had left. They're chasing after them."

"To the mountain... Why?!" Abel's voice was a high-pitched shriek.

The townsfolk had carefully camouflaged themselves for their escape; how had they been discovered?

"This is bad, Abel." Even Antonio understood the gravity of this. "We need to go back. We need to let Father Iqus know!"

If things had gone as planned, the townsfolk would be entering the mountain right about now. It would be difficult to get a signal through to them once they were underground. If the *Iron Maiden* were overhead, then they could request a radio link, but Kate had moved away so that the Department of Inquisition would not detect their presence. If Abel and Antonio turned back now, then they would lose this chance of finding Cherubim, and they still might not be able to warn Tres and the others.

"No. We must keep going." Abel shook his head. "Tres will look after the townsfolk. We will continue as planned and capture Cherubim."

"What?! There are sick and elderly there! It's only a matter of time before New Vatican catch up with them."

"If we were there, it wouldn't change anything. Anyway..." Abel pushed his spectacles

back up the bridge of his nose. His expression was very serious now. "Anyway, if we can't secure Cherubim, it will be the end of us and Caterina. Tres is looking after them. I have faith in him, and we have our own job to do."

Abel was right. But Antonio didn't seem entirely convinced: "You're right. But you can be heartless."

"You've only just noticed?" Abel shrugged. He pushed his spectacles against his face again. His fingers were trembling a little. It was something he couldn't explain to Antonio. But he resolved to forget the people heading to the mountain and turned his attention back to the soldier. "Then one more question: Is Cardinal d'Este still in this castle?"

"Umm..." The soldier looked up in fear at the uncaring priest. He then looked to the gun in Antonio's hand. Finally, in a trembling voice, he answered, "Yes, His Holiness is in the castle..." The soldier trailed off. It sounded as if he was going to reveal exactly where.

Suddenly there was the sound of something flying above, which halted their conversation. "Antonio! Get down!"

If Abel and Antonio had not fallen to the floor, then they would have both had their heads sliced off. The decapitated head of the soldier rolled back. The gun that Cardinal of Valencia had been holding had also been sliced.

Antonio let out a holler, but Abel wasn't there. He was reaching for his own gun.

"Hah! Too late! Unbelievers!"

The sound of an old revolver rang out. Fresh blood dripped from a cut on the back of Abel's hand. The man wielding the gun smiled ruthlessly as he glared down at Abel.

"I'm glad to meet you again, AX Agents... But this will be the last time."

From behind Friedrich, a few dozen soldiers fired a volley of bullets.

III

"Twenty-one-hundred. We should be reaching the end of the tunnel soon," Eulis muttered to no one in particular.

Eulis looked up from his pocket watch. The inside of the giant pipe looked like a gloomy cave. Under the electric lighting, the conveyer continued to move along with a low roar. The conveyer was meant to take Oilshell from the mountain to the purification plant. Tonight, though, the belt wasn't carrying minerals. It was carrying three thousand townsfolk, all of them looking a little uneasy.

"How is your leg, Father Tres?"

Eulis and Tres were sitting at the back of the group. Eulis turned his attention away from the group of huddled, frightened townsfolk and to the priest who sat next to him. "Does it hurt?"

"Negative. There is no pain." Tres' face was emotionless as always. He was currently treating the area on his right thigh where he had been shot that morning, when he had been defending Eulis. Under the manmade skin was shape-memory plastic, which had been pinned back to allow Tres to access the damage sections. "However, the condenser in my upper-right leg is damaged. There is a possibility that my leg will overheat in a prolonged battle." Tres continued to assess the damage to his body.

"I see." Eulis looked a little pained. "I'm really sorry for this morning, Father Tres. I shouldn't have said such terrible things to the person who defended me. You were right. I am weak."

"Negative." As ever, the mechanical soldier was expressionless. He wasn't accepting the apology. He continued to work on his leg as he spoke. "It is true that your psychological hesitation was the cause of our failure in a previous battle, but in today's battle, you have aided the townsfolk to escape. I have to reassess your value now."

"No. I really am weak." Eulis was surprised at Tres' kind consolation, but still he shook his head sadly. "It's been two years since I inherited my father's position. I intended to work hard. I

built roads and schools. But when it comes to war, I'm useless."

Eulis looked down at the fragments of Oilshell on the conveyer. His eyes were full of bitterness. He screwed up his face as if he had just been forced to drink some bitter medicine. "As soon as I heard the first gun shots, I blanked out. Next thing I knew, I was outside of the castle. I am a coward. I wish I could have been born as someone who could feel joy in the heat of battle, like yourself." Eulis pulled his character apart, bit by bit.

Tres' reply to it was calm: "I have not once felt joy in battle." Tres did not speak out of pride, but rather to make Eulis understand. "Ever since I was turned on, I have not felt the need to fight. My battles have been because I was ordered to... or something similar. Your assessment of me has been incorrect, sir."

"Ordered? You mean that your superiors told you to do this?"

"Negative. There was no direct order. But any task which serves to defend my mistress' life or position is my top priority. I have to neglect everything else.

"I see." Eulis sighed. He looked back at the townspeople, who were still squatting down, glancing around in fear. There was something that Eulis prioritized over all else too. He would risk everything to save it. He would risk himself if he could save them...

"It's strange," Eulis started to think. When Eulis turned back round to meet the eyes of the bloodless Tres this time, he smiled. "Father Tres, why will people fight to save the lives of others, even at the risk of their own lives? Why stand against those that are stronger?"

"Count, silence please." Tres ignored Eulis' musing. He quickly turned around. He flipped the safety catch on the giant gun in his hand.

"What is it? Father Iqus?"

"The enemy."

Their world was torn apart in the next moment.

About one-thousand feet behind them, there was a large explosion, which engulfed the pipe; the wind created by it knocked the townsfolk down.

"What was that?!" Eulis shook his head. He'd temporarily lost his hearing. But he could see that the belt had stopped moving and the townsfolk were screaming out in fear. He turned around to ascertain what had caused the explosion, but what he saw froze him to the spot. "It's them!"

A gaping hole had been made in the pipe. It looked like a huge demon had come down and taken a bite out of it. A large snow drift had also fallen into the tunnel. What really caught Eulis' attention, though, was not the destruction. From the other side of the gaping hole were a swarm of black shadows.

"Ne-New Vatican!" Eulis gulped.

"They must have detected us," the mechanical soldier offered as a short explanation.

From armored vehicles lined up outside the hole, hundreds of soldiers had started filtering out.

"Go ahead," Tres ordered Eulis as he changed the cartridge of his gun to tungsten bullets. "We are about seventeen miles from the mountain. If you move quickly, you will be able to arrive there within one hundred and fifty minutes. Then when you arrive, you must seal the entrance as quickly as possible. That should buy you some time."

"What are you going to do, Father Tres?" "I will stay. I can hold them off here and buy you some more time."

Tres watched the all-Terran vehicles maneuver their cannons. People on foot would be no match for such vehicles. Tres would have to take out the vehicles, or they would catch up with the evacuees. "Leave it to me. Hurry, sir. You are the only one who can guide them."

"I... ah..." Eulis opened his mouth as if to say something, but Tres had already turned round. "You are not a war leader."

The townsfolk were looking at each other with concern and calling out pathetically.

"You have a priority. That is to protect them." "I'm sorry, Father Tres!" Eulis lowered his head defeated, his voice trembling. "I'm sorry!" "GO! NOW!"

The young Eulis turned around and began to lead the townsfolk further down the tunnel.

"Switching to Genocide-mode. Combat Open." The unlucky soldiers' heads that got in the way of Tres' flurry of bullets were turned into hunks of meat. But it wasn't long before the cartridges in his guns ran out. Tres quickly hid himself behind a boulder. The bullets that were aimed at him buried themselves into the snow.

The soldiers made exclamations of frustration... but they didn't expect the next round of bullets that sunk into their chests.

"Deleted thirteen, downed three..." Tres shook out his wrists. White steam came from the magazines lying on the floor. "Search-mode. Locate the captain."

While he changed the magazine in his rifle, Tres searched for the commander. The snow and geography should have been in his favor, but with this much of a strength disparity, that was no longer the case. Also, against armored vehicles, his defensive capabilities were greatly reduced. He was equipped to fight in the snow, but his polymer-based artificial skin was unlikely to be a good defense against such high-powered weaponry. He needed to take out the commander quickly. That way, he could confuse the ranks and segment them.

"Are you hiding here? Heretic scum!"

While Tres was considering his options, he heard a throaty voice calling to him. Suddenly a giant sword came crashing down, splitting the rock that Tres was hiding behind.

"God is all-knowing and all-powerful. Don't think you can escape, sinner."

Heidrich's eyes glinted with lunacy. He roared then swung the swords, which glinted in the light that was reflected off the snow, back down to the ground. "Die!"

"Point-two-eight seconds late."

Tres dodged, rolling backward and then springing to his feet. His artificial muscles and lightweight frame allowed him to perform some very acrobatic moves. He jumped up into the air and repeatedly pulled the triggers of the guns in his hands.

"Hah! Not good enough!" Heidrich snorted. He kicked up snow, which swallowed the M13's bullets.

Suddenly, Tres disappeared. No, he hadn't disappeared. Gunslinger had, with lightning speed, moved to the right and was now letting loose another flurry of bullets. It knocked his enemy back for a second.

Heidrich slashed at the air again, but Tres had already moved behind him. Though Tres had avoided that slash, another one came from the right. It would have been physically impossible to avoid if it had not been for his abnormal weight.

"Point-oh-eight seconds late."

However close he had come to death, Gunslinger didn't look perturbed. As Heidrich slashed again, Tres turned his gun and fired straight at his enemy. But it was Tres' body that grumbled. He had overexerted himself; he took a step back.

Had his leg been overexerted and given in? No. From his right knee, there was black smoke pouring out. It looked like the coolant in his right leg supports had been damaged and it was now overheating.

"Praise the Lord. I've got you, AX!" Heidrich swung his sword into the air. It drew a silver line in the air.

Tres was still trying to stand back up again.

From the deep gouge in his cassock, internal fluid spurted out. Torn artificial flesh sprung out of the wound like elastic. Still, Tres tried to lift the gun...

"A mere Doll is no match to me!"

Heidrich planted a kick in Tres' chest, knocking him back down to the ground. He'd taken some substantial internal damage. His body was twitching in places. Tres wasn't trying to get up anymore.

"What foolishness." Heidrich mocked the fallen warrior at his feet. He thrust the point of one of his swords against the man's neck. "I am a warrior of God. Sacred. I could never lose to the likes of you. I feel sorry for you, you lapdog of Sforza!" He carefully steadied his sword. This was to be the last blow.

But Tres didn't beg for his life. Instead, he murmured something colder and more

unforgiving than the snow: "Shall we test how 'sacred'?"

On pure instinct, he jumped back — if he hadn't, he would have been sure to lose his head. A dark black wind shot across the ice. The force of this entrance was almost explosive.

"Well dodged. You are more than just words, then," a calm voice mocked Heidrich.

When did this newcomer arrive? The figure stood between the fallen tuned soldier and Heidrich. It was another young man with pale blonde hair with glittering eyes.

Heidrich turned round to the man. "Who the hell are you?!"

He yelped when he saw the man twirling a baton in his hands move toward him. Panicking, he dodged the attack, but it managed to graze his cheek. This was no ordinary man! "Another heretic, like the Doll!"

"I am Hugue," the newcomer calmly replied. His hand twisted behind his back as if it were a separate creature to him. Suddenly, he sprang into action. He turned somersaults around the soldiers who had tried to blindside him. Lashing out here and there with his stick, he knocked a man to the ground with each swipe. He didn't once look down at the victims who lay screaming in pain on the floor. He then turned his blood-drenched staff to Heidrich.

"I am AX Agent Sword Dancer. I will not forgive this treatment of my friends, New Vatican. Leave now!"

IV

"Leave? What nonsense!" Heidrich roared. He was seething with rage at this intrusion. "You must remember me, but do you think you could defeat me as a normal human?"

In the next instant, Heidrich changed positions, looking like a bird folding his wings. The soldier fixed his gaze and then accelerated across the snow at an unbelievable speed.

"Can you keep up with me, Sword Dancer?!"

Heidrich swung his swords. His movements were lightning-quick. However skilled the soldier, it would have taken perfect timing to counter the two swords coming from the left and right.

"You are indeed fast. But that's all." Hugue grimaced a little as he faced the challenge. He gently moved the rod in his hand and split it into two parts. The rod was in fact a sword in its sheath. Hugue slipped out a thin metal blade. "Speed alone is not enough to defeat me."

"What?!" Heidrich exclaimed in surprise. In a flash of blue and white light, his two beloved swords were shattered into hundreds of pieces, sparkling as they fell. "Ho-how...?!"

A tuned soldier could pluck a hummingbird out of the air. But a regular person wouldn't see a thing.

"Fire! Kill him!" Heidrich screamed. The soldiers shot at Hugue, buying Heidrich some time to put some distance between the two of them. But it wasn't enough, as Hugue ran around him.

"Those who live by the sword..."

The jumping power of a tuned soldier was enough to rival that of a vampire. It was not possible for a flesh-and-blood human to keep up. With the calm voice like that of a god of death, Hugue pulled himself close to the face of the terrified Heidrich and whispered: "Will die by the sword, Amen."

There was a flash of blue lightning, and what remained of his swords danced up into the sky... along with the severed head of Heidrich.

The scream and gush of fresh blood seemed to come a moment too late.

"He-Heidrich?!"

The soldiers gasped in shock at the sight of their commander's destruction. In the next moment, their shock turned to horror. "Bring it on!"

Discarding Heidrich where he'd fallen, Hugue ran at the lines of soldiers. Left and right, there was a flash of light, a red cloud, and the sounds of screaming.

"Fire! Get some distance and shoot him!" The officers tried to call out their orders, but their

voices couldn't get through. The murderous light danced through the ranks. It seemed to play with the fleeing soldiers as it ran through their lines, leaving behind only corpses.

"Get the mechanical soldier! We can use him as a hostage!" one officer screamed, suddenly remembering the existence of the precious hostage they had managed to capture. They could use him as a shield!

"Where is he?! Bring him here!"

However, the only reply that he got was a mocking voice: "I don't think they're going to listen." From the driver's seat of one of the vehicles, a large soldier looked down. His lips were twisted into a strange expression, and sunglasses covered his eyes. The soldier laughed. "But we could be friends... get together..."

The laughing man next to him was none other than the mechanical soldier! When he realized it, it was too late. Leon pushed the switch that was clutched in his hand.

In the next instant, there was a brilliant white light. While they had been occupied by Sword Dancer, Leon had taken the gunpowder and covered a stolen vehicle with it. He had mixed aluminum and magnesium and ammonia in with the gunpowder. It had the effect of creating a blinding white light and a cloud of tear gas. All the soldiers in the vicinity sucked it in.

The soldiers temporarily lost their sight and coughed and spluttered in the gas. Leon took the chance to call to his friend. "Done! Get in, Samurai!"

He slammed his foot down on the acceleration. The diesel engine roared.

"There's no point staying here!" Leon yelled. Hugue nodded and deftly jumped onto the roof of the vehicle. He looked searchingly up into the clouds. "Quickly, Father Garcia. They're coming!" The heavens opened.

Hugue had been right. From the gap in the clouds came hundreds of black balls that fell down to the ground.

The soldiers were distracted and looked up to see what was going on. They didn't even have time to scream before they were obliterated in a cloud of blood. The Vulcan cannon was originally intended for anti-vehicle use. Its power was large enough to turn several dozens of humans into flying chunks of meat in one shot.

"Pretty good, Samurai! Let's go!" Leon yelled.

The vehicle accelerated quickly. A few unfortunate soldiers who found themselves in its path were hurled over the hood. The car set a course for the summit of the mountain.

The swordsman clung to the hood as the car threw him from side to side. He looked up into the sky. The cannons didn't cease. Every so often, one would hit close, but they did not turn Hugue's gaze. He was staring intently at the three huge shadows that had appeared from out of the cloud cover. Three huge warships were descending, all with the motto "Vineam Domini" emblazoned along the side.

"Your Eminence, the remnants of the enemy have been almost entirely cleaned up. However, according to the reports of the landing forces, there are no members of AX among the dead."

Half an hour later, Arnold di Cambio had received a transmission *from* the parachute unit. A bead of sweat formed on his tense brow. He was standing in front of the command desk on the bridge of the *Jahael*. His voice was reverent. "According to the prisoners that we took, they were headed with the Tallinn residents to a cave about one and a half miles from here. Shall we pursue them?"

"Of course," the young man who sat behind the command desk replied immediately. He scratched at his black hair. He then turned his attention to the monitor and smiled. "Pursuing AX is our sacred duty. Defeating New Vatican is just a happy bonus. Captain Cambio, start battle preparations."

"Bu-but, Brother Matthaïos..." Cambio timidly looked at the Inquisition officer, who was playing with a staff in his hand. Cambio usually cut a strict figure and could strike fear in all his subordinates, but compared to the man he was now facing, he may as well have been the Madonna herself. "They are currently hiding among the residents of Tallinn. If we attack now, there will be a great loss of life to the citizens."

"That's just too bad. We don't want to leave witnesses; I think we need to annihilate everything."

"What?" Cambio was astonished. Was Matthaïos telling him that it would be better to kill them all?

Matthaïos then opened a thin file and started talking about something totally unrelated. "Did you know about this, Captain? It looks like this country had oil. Look, the cave they've hidden in is probably where they mine the Oilshell. This is really something. Oil is a precious resource that not even the Vatican has much access to. But this little out-of-the-way country has been quietly mining away. It's amazing, isn't it?"

"Um... yes?" Cambio managed a half-hearted reply. He couldn't stop the feelings that were swirling round inside him now. Cambio couldn't understand this Inquisition officer, but he had a bad feeling about all of this. And a veteran captain's instinct was always right.

The Inquisition officer closed the file and in a calm voice asked, "Captain, just as a thought... If the citizens of Tallinn were to get caught up in the fighting with AX and were, unfortunately, slaughtered, then who would this mountain belong to?"

"The mountain...?" Cambio was really puzzled. What was he talking about?

However, it didn't seem like Matthaïos was really looking for Cambio's input. He immediately started answering his own question: "Oil is a gem of the people. If the owners were to be annihilated, then we couldn't let it lie neglected. It would need an honest and prudent organization to oversee its continued mining. Don't you agree?"

Finally Cambio was realizing what the Inquisition officer was talking about. He wanted to take the precious oil for the Vatican as spoils of war. And to get those resources, he was prepared to perpetuate something really terrible.

"Your Eminence, you can't really –"

"Anything that happens here will be the responsibility of Duchess of Milan and AX. We were only doing our duty as we pursued the heretics. Sometimes, terrible things happen. We can't take the blame for that," Matthaïos said.

Matthaïos handed Cambio the file and quietly stood up. He gently tapped the cane in his hand as he added another order: "I want you to have the Uriel prepared. I will take command of the battle. Raise the altitude of the *Jahoel* and be on standby. I want you to patrol and provide air support."

When he had finished giving out his orders, Matthaïos walked away from the command desk. He left the captain alone as he headed for the hanger.

If he only wanted to murder all of AX and the townsfolk, it would be simple. It would only require a few cannon shots and bombs to the mountain for it to be all over. But he was thinking of the future, and he wanted to try and safeguard the pipeline. Therefore, he had decided to launch a ground attack to prevent unnecessary damage.

"Then we will wipe out three thousand townspeople. How many years has it been since such a purification?"

Matthaïos raised his hands as the elevator descended down to the hanger. His face was flushed. He was exhilarated. He reached up and rubbed his finger down an old scar. He smiled faintly.

"This will be the biggest task since Tangier. I hope I'm not disappointed."

V

"You had this all planned, didn't you? Lure the main force out of the town and then

target His Holiness. You think we'd fall into your trap?" Friedrich said.

The tuned soldier twisted the tips of his whips between his fingers. He glared at the intruders as he steadied himself. He maneuvered so that he wasn't obstructing the line of fire of the soldiers standing behind him.

"Trap...?" Abel shook his head as he pressed down on the back of his hand. Friedrich was making it sound like they had planned to divert attention away from the castle, using the townsfolk as a strategic distraction. "If it was all a trap, then how did you know we were here?"

"Playing ignorant? Fine." Friedrich glanced over at the priest coldly. His gaze then moved slowly to focus on the young man trying to hide behind Abel. Friedrich's facial muscles tightened. "I can see you there, Borgia!"

"Ah, long time, no see, Father Friedrich." Antonio waved a hand as if he had just noticed Friedrich's presence. Friedrich ground his teeth, but Antonio kept talking as if he were chatting with a friend he hadn't met with in a while: "Last time we met was at Koln, right? So it's been half a year. You're looking well! My dear friend. How's Cardinal d'Este?"

"IMPUDENT!" Clearly, he was in no mood for reminiscing and catching up. He swung his whips and roared in rage. "Just because you sold that list to Rome, do you think that we're in the same camp now?! It's unforgivable! Bringing AX and targeting New Vatican!"

"You're mistaken!" Antonio pushed his hand to his chest and exclaimed. He cried out like an actor in some tragedy. "I swear to the heavens. It wasn't me who sold them the list. I was not thinking of attacking the Pope. I came to deliver this dangerous man."

"Ah, betrayed again!" Abel shook his head in astonishment and disappointment.

Antonio pushed him toward the line of soldiers and bowed his head.

Abel could almost see his invisible devils tail wagging furiously.

"You can cook him, fry him, do whatever you want, now... If this was all it took to prove my loyalty to Pope Alfonso, then it was very simple." Antonio grinned.

"There are even simpler ways to prove your loyalty, Borgia." Friedrich wasn't going to return the smile, though. He threw a handgun across the floor. It skidded to Antonio's feet. "Kill this lapdog yourself. Then you'll have proved it."

"Antonio, pretend to do as he says. Pick up the gun," Abel whispered. "When you pick it up, I'll move. We have one chance. I'm counting on you."

"I'm sorry. I don't think..." Antonio was also whispering. There wasn't an ounce of guilt in his face. He picked up the gun and pressed it against Abel's back.

"Don't try to get away this time. I'm sorry, Abel. You will be a sacrifice."

"What?! You're serious?!" Abel paled. He could feel the mouth of the gun against his back, and it sent a shiver down his spine. In front of him were almost ten soldiers, all with their guns pointed straight at him. This really looked like it might be the end of the line.

"Put your guns down! You blasphemous heretics!"

The husky, yet attractive, voice of a woman echoed down the cloister. Abel thought he could make out a slim figure at the top of the stairs. She was curvaceous. The woman was wearing a thick fur coat. Her white face was almost indistinguishable from the snow.

Both Antonio and Abel exclaimed when they saw who it was: "COUNTESS ANHALT?!"

It was Christa Anhalt. She should have been with the townsfolk who had escaped to the mountains, so why on earth was she here?! And furthermore, what was that she was holding...

"A machine gun?! Where the hell did you get that?!" Friedrich wailed.

Christa didn't answer his question. Instead, she let out a flurry of bullets from the machine gun pushed to her waist.

"Ahhhhhhh!" Abel screamed as he saw the barrage of bullets blow away the snow and head straight for them. He instinctively jumped. A good move – otherwise he would have been mincemeat in seconds.

"Ch-Christa, watch where you're aiming!" Abel called up. "Aaaah! How do I stop this thing?!" the woman holding the gun cried. The force of the weapon had pushed her against the wall, but the gun continued to spew bullets. The machine gun was fully automatic and relentless.

The soldiers who tried to aim at her didn't have a chance to target properly amid the rain of bullets coming down at them. It really wasn't a weapon for a beginner or a physically weak person. But it was doing the job. "ABEL, RUN!"

There were screams and cries of pain coming from the soldiers as the bullets came raining in. In the chaos, Antonio had quickly turned around. He had put the gun on his back and was now running toward Christa. Abel was fascinated by the sight of Antonio acting so bravely for a few seconds. He swept up the guns at his feet and then ran up the stairs.

"Ch-Christa what are you doing here?" The machine gun had finally run out of ammunition. Christa was standing there, looking a little dazed in the sudden return to quiet.

"You should have been with Tres and the others at the mountain!"

"I was worried about my husband." Christa tensed up as if the priests were threatening her. "So I decided to follow you, but I got lost and then — "

"Abel, let's leave the talking for later!" Antonio interrupted her. Some of the soldiers who had come out of the previous chaos unscathed were standing at the bottom of the stairs. "If you want to get out of here alive, we have to do something!"

"This way. There's an elevator over here." Christa was pointing down the corridor. They could hear the sound of bullets narrowly missing their heads. They didn't have time to hesitate. With Abel and Antonio at either side of Christa, they ran.

It was a simple but sturdy elevator. The three of them skidded into it. From behind, they could hear the sound of footsteps running down the corridor. Abel yanked the lattice gate shut, and the elevator whirled into motion with a low sound. Finally they were lifted up and taken out of danger.

"What do we do now?" Christa seemed terrified. She was huddled up on the floor. "How are we going to get out of here? And what about my husband and this Cherubim you're looking for...?"

Abel looked up to the heavens. He didn't know how they were going to pull it off either. He wanted to ask the exact same questions. They only had a few hours left until the Department of Inquisition was supposed to arrive. Would they be able to get around the castle in that time?

While Abel was lost, puzzling over these problems, Antonio approached Christa and started rubbing her back. "It'll be okay, Senora Christa. I don't suppose you saw Alfonso d'Este in your travels? If we can take him as a hostage, we'll probably be able to escape."

"I might have seen him, but I don't know what he looks like so I wouldn't know." Christa shook her head. She was a rural aristocrat, so she wouldn't have had the chance to meet the central leaders. "I'm so sorry. I'm useless to you."

"No, you're not. Look, we're here."

The chime on the bell rang, and the gates opened. The door had opened up to reveal a wide, pleasant study. On the walls were lines of bookcases, filled with books. The room was being kept warm by a roaring fireplace. There was also a desk, which was almost entirely buried in a mountain of books.

"There was a lot of noise coming from downstairs. Did something happen, Friedrich?"

One of the two men standing in front of the desk turned round. There was a moment of shock and confusion on the man's wrinkled face and then there was realization. "Yo-you?!"

Alfonso knew Abel's face.

Beside Alfonso was another man, who now moved in front of Alfonso to shield him.

"What the hell are you two doing here?!" Alfonso yelled.

Antonio moved faster than Abel. He whipped out his gun. "Hey, don't move!" Antonio barked. "The Lord be praised. We've been lucky today. We've found the both of them!"

"The both of them..."

"Both of them? Then this is..." Abel looked at the man shielding Alfonso. It was an old man with diluted eyes. "This is Cherubim?!"

"Abel, cut the power off to the elevator. We don't want those guys downstairs getting up here. Senora Christa, tie Cherubim up."

Lost in his thoughts, Abel walked over to the elevator to cut off the main power.

Antonio handed Christa some cord, and she followed his instructions. Now that they had Cherubim and Alfonso, they didn't need to stay any longer. They would be able to use Alfonso as a negotiation tool to stop New Vatican from pursuing the townsfolk to the mountain. "Aaaah!"

Abel twirled round when he heard the scream. "Cardinal Borgia?! What are you doing?!" Abel couldn't believe his eyes. Cherubim's hands were tied. That was all good. Christa, on the other hand, was cowering against the wall. And Antonio was aiming the gun straight at her?! "Antonio. What are you...?"

"I'm really sorry that it had to come to this, Senora Christa." Antonio smiled. "This cheap play is over already. I think it's time for you to tell us who you really are. Come on, Countess Anhalt."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Father! What do you mean?" Christa cried back. Her face turned even whiter than usual. "I'm me! You know who I am!"

"You said that you didn't know Alfonso. So how did you know who to tie up?" Antonio wasn't cheerful anymore. He continued questioning Christa, all the while keeping his finger poised over the trigger. "I told you to tie up Cherubim. Without hesitation, you knew who I was talking about. How could that be? Unless you knew who Cherubim or Alfonso were in the first place. Am I wrong?"

"Ah." Abel's jaw dropped. His gaze slid over to Christa. Antonio was right. He wasn't finished yet, though.

"There are still things we don't know. I thought that you were a New Vatican spy or possibly one of Cardinal Medici's followers. But that wouldn't explain how you knew who Cherubim was... So, Countess, tell us who you really are."

Christa's head had dropped as the questions had continued. Her thin fingers fiddled with the fur on her coat, but she didn't tremble. "Hee hee... Idiot," she muttered so quietly that it could almost be mistaken for a sigh. Her sensuous lips curled into a cruel smile. "I worked hard on this miserable act, but you really are idiots."

Christa looked like a totally different person now. From under her skirt, she pulled a long, thin stick.

"Hey, don't move!" Antonio shouted. "I don't want to shoot a woman, but if you make me..."

Christa, or whatever her name was, lifted the wand she was holding and aimed straight at Antonio.

"Antonio! Get out of the way!" Abel tackled Antonio. A second later and Antonio might have been dead. The two of them rolled across the floor.

"Huh?"

There was a dull *thud*. Antonio and Abel looked up in horror. Something white loomed above them. Rising up the ceiling was a three-foot-tall pillar of ice.

Ice Witch waved her wand again.

"It will not be possible for you to succeed in your desire to rescue Sforza. I'll take Cherubim back to Rome for you. You can rest easy!"

A strange glowing ball of white light grew in the room.

VI

The weather in the mountains was changing. It had been snowing heavily, but now it the snowfall was light. Mist formed a thick wall, so it was impossible to see far.

"Visibility is three feet. Fabio, Tristan, you have permission to use the infrared sensor. Be careful with it."

Left and right of the small mountain road were steep cliffs. Special Forces Officer Ettore Berlusconi had to take special care that he didn't slip on the ice.

They had to take even more care with the metal giants they were driving. The balancer on

Samson, the church mechanical suit, was perfect. With the jet skis attached, the ten-foot-tall giant could reach a top speed of thirteen miles per hour. Without slipping once, the giant continued to ascend the mountain. Because of that, they had gone too far ahead of the follow up deployment.

"Is it really all right for us to be so far ahead? Officer? Is this not going against His Eminence Matthaios' orders?"

"Don't worry about it. Our enemies are unarmed country bumpkins." Berlusconi brushed away Corporal Fabio's doubts. "We'll kill them all with what we have here. What does the Department of Inquisition know about war?" Berlusconi was young but he had already had a lot of experience at armored infantry battle. One week ago, he was moved from the regular church army to the special forces, exactly because his achievements in this field had been recognized. The young officer was excited by his new position. "Anyway, as long as we win, then the Department of Inquisition won't complain. We'll teach them how to fight a real war."

"But, sir, I'm not sure that the Inquisition officer we're dealing with is a novice." Corporal Tristan now stood up for Fabio over the intercom. He cast doubt on the truth of Berlusconi's assertions. *"I heard that he was a mercenary in Africa. I also heard that he took part in the Gibraltar War."*

"Mercenary? Why would a mercenary join the Department of Inquisition?" Berlusconi wasn't happy with this piece of information. To a born and bred soldier, there wasn't much of a difference between a mercenary and a rogue. "Impossible! That would make a mockery of the Vatican." *"Sir! Enemy ahead!"*

Berlusconi's lament was interrupted by a scream coming out of his intercom.

"It's the civilians! One o'clock! Three, no, four of them... They've noticed us! They're running!" "They won't get away!"

His monitor screen zoomed in on a picture of four human figures running into the mist. Berlusconi screamed in frustration. Things would get more difficult if the civilians informed their friends.

"Permission to fire! They mustn't get away!" The suit quickly mobilized. There was a roar from the jet skis. "Don't think you'll get away from me!" The computer started to get the calculations that he needed. Berlusconi smiled. He was driving a piece of Lost Technology, a strong weapon that could take on even vampires. Crushing ordinary humans would be a piece of cake. He started to squeeze the trigger.

"Hah!"

But before he had a chance to squeeze, his concentration was broken by a violent attack. Something was restricting the machine's giant legs. A thin wire that had been stretched across the ground had wrapped itself around the vehicle. The same thing had happened to Berlusconi's three colleagues. All three machines came crashing to the ground.

"Cheap trick!" Berlusconi cursed the wire. His suit hadn't taken any damage but his pride had. "I won't let you get away with this! I'll kill you all!"

"Sir! The enemy! At three... no, nine o'clock."

Thirsting for revenge, Berlusconi turned to the monitor. He could see several human figures in the mist. They looked like civilians. But in their hands were hunting guns and Molotov cocktails.

"Where did they come from? Why didn't they show up on the infrared?!"

"Calm down, Tristan. They're just scum. We'll separate and crush them one by one."

The civilians started firing. From behind a snowdrift came a torrent of bullets raining down on Berlusconi and his men. Such small munitions wouldn't even dent the thick metal of the suit. Berlusconi was justified in laughing at their feeble efforts. "Little candy bombs aren't going to get me. Cretins. Huh? What's that?"

Berlusconi stopped laughing and squinted at the monitor. He noticed that the gray coating on his suit was turning black. Why? They were throwing dirt at his suit.

"Mud? No... it's..."

But Berlusconi wasn't given enough time to work out the origin of the mud.

"Sir! Enemy at nine o'clock!"

A figure rose out of a pit in the floor. It was a giant in torn priest garments. The man grinned and then pulled the trigger on the huge firearm he held.

The gun issued a burning flare. In the next moment, Berlusconi's vision went white. The mud, which had been thrown onto his suit, immediately burst into flames. A war vehicle could withstand one-thousand centigrade degrees heat, but even so...

"How dare you?!"

Within the flames, Berlusconi pulled himself up to his full height and laughed.

Despite being engulfed in flames, the giant robots, now standing, were unscathed. Their casing was multilayered and could withstand millions of gunshots. Berlusconi wondered if the villagers really thought flame was going to stop them.

"I bet you think you're clever! Sorry, but you're not!" Berlusconi turned his weapon to the left and aimed at the large man.

"Sir! Enemy at two o'clock. It's snowballs!"

"Snowballs?!"

Berlusconi looked puzzled at this new report. He looked away, and his eyes met a snowball coming down on his right side. Not an ordinary snowball though; this one was about six feet in diameter.

"And now you want a snowball fight?! Amateurs!" Berlusconi screamed and punched the incoming snowball. The flaming fist of the suit melted the snowball almost immediately on contact. "Oh, I should thank you. That worked out nicely for me."

Berlusconi once again turned his weapon to the left. This time he would kill that large man. He pulled the trigger with a snigger. However, his gun was silent. "No way! I'm out of bullets!"

That couldn't be. Berlusconi pulled on the trigger again, but no bullets were apparent. There was something suspicious about this.

"Sir... we can't move the suits!" his subordinate called over the intercom.

Berlusconi realized that the same thing was happening to his machine. He couldn't move the suit. He tried his best, but no matter what he did, his artificial muscles couldn't move it.

That mud was made of oil shale and kerosene. When mixed, they were flammable. However, when oil shale is heated at a high temperature, it becomes liquid. That liquid had then worked its way into the suit. The snow had re-solidified and acted as an adhesive.

"Sir! On your right!" Another ominous scream came over the intercom. The civilians were pushing something on the slope. It looked like a truck used for mining...

"Dynamite?! Everyone, move!"

Berlusconi slammed his foot on the acceleration. His jet skis were still attached to the icy floor, but they revved up. Berlusconi desperately tried to move the machine away from the trap. Fortunately the wire had melted in the fire. Berlusconi's machine surged forward.

"Sir! Help us!" one of his subordinates screamed. He had been a few seconds too late and hadn't managed to clear the explosion. Still, Berlusconi didn't turn round.

"Cowards! You're not getting away with this!"

He had lost a subordinate. He would have to kill all of them if he couldn't go back to his unit. He launched an attack on the large man.

The man hadn't tried to move from that spot. Instead, he had a strange, unnerving smile on his face.

"One down. I'm not done yet."

The external microphone was picking him up. On the monitor he stood alone.

"Well, bring it on then, Samson."

Suddenly a third voice broke in: *"This is fortunate."*

In the corner of his vision, a bright white light broke through the clouds.

"We have confirmed that they are the bodies of Fabio and Tristan. Berlusconi's machine was found and there is evidence that he was prisoner."

The giant metal machines were lying where they'd fallen on the scorched earth. The sergeant indicated to the soldiers to start the clean up process.

"There is no doubt that they were taken out by the enemy. I don't know how they even managed to take out three suits. This is a real loss."

"What does it matter? We should be pleased that we got rid of unreliable equipment," Brother Matthaios said. His face, in stark contrast to the sergeant's, was cheerful. He examined with great interest the pits and snow drifts that had been used in the fight.

"Berlusconi was no great talent. And with such a small sacrifice, we now better understand our enemy. This is very good. Look here." Berlusconi was pointing into the bottom of one of the snow pits. "The sides are steep and the corners are clean. There are little ditches cut into the corners. Those were dug for hand grenades. These moats have dead ends and are designed to trap enemies. This is not the work of a novice."

Matthaios crawled out of the moat and dusted himself off. He narrowed the eyes and looked fondly upon the devastation of the battle. "They either have a soldier or a professional at guerilla warfare instructing them."

"Are there any guerrilla experts amongst the AX Agents?" The sergeant stiffened up. He understood the difficulties of fighting guerillas in mountain terrain. "Your Eminence. Shall we withdraw? After we've taken control of Tallinn, we can return to attack again. I think it would be wise."

The mine in which the citizens were hiding was in a ravine a few miles ahead. Currently, Matthaios had one small unit of armored vehicles and one large unit of special officers. They would be limited to how many soldiers could enter the ravine; they also didn't know what sort of traps might await them there. And if the enemy had someone who had experience in guerilla warfare, the losses could be substantial.

But the Inquisition officer seemed unperturbed. "You don't need to worry. We know that there are professionals now. We have the upper hand. It's going to be all the more fun," Matthaios said as he played with the stick in his hand. He nodded cheerfully. "It is my sacred duty to exterminate the heretics. There is no greater pleasure. That includes all those who aid the heretics, even AX. None will leave this mountain alive."

"The enemy is very professional," Leon said when he got down from the vehicle. Eulis had come to greet Leon at the entrance of the tunnel. "A top-rate commander. This is going to be difficult."

"Top rate? You're the same, right, Father Garcia? I couldn't believe it when you stopped three of those machines." Eulis looked out on the snowfield with admiration. He had not expected the citizens to return triumphant from that battle.

The men had received warm welcomes from their families. They had little prior battle experience, but they had taken down three suits. Everyone had come home safe! The whole group was giddy with the joy of victory. However, the man who had led them didn't seem to be celebrating.

He was inspecting a map and running his finger over it. He didn't look happy. "Unfortunately, that was only the warm-up. There are many troops left. We can't relax yet. This is only a conjecture, but they seem to be aiming for this ravine. There are three routes they could take."

"They've chosen the safest." Eulis rubbed his jaw as he looked at the map. "It looks dangerous but it is in fact the safest route. Few locals know this route. Could they have someone who is familiar with the territory?"

"In a top-class war room, they will be able to look at any map and see the potential routes straight away," Leon replied without looking up. He wrote messy words across the crumpled map, while checking the long hand of a clock and the altitude of the moon every now and then. "As I thought. None of the routes are helpful to us. There's no mistaking it; our opponents are excellent. And also ruthless!" Leon glared at the map.

"Father Garcia?" asked a voice from behind them. Turning around, they saw a few of the townsfolk. With them was a longhaired priest who was holding a shovel in one hand. "Ah, Samurai, are you done?"

"Yes, we did what you asked," Hugue replied curtly as he threw the shovel into the snow. "I don't think I've missed anything. But I'd like you to do the final checks."

"What are you talking about?" Eulis asked. "More traps?" "Yes, traps—in case they send someone in after us." Hugue started looking at the map he'd been handed. He gave a little wink to Leon then rubbed his beard and smirked. "We don't really want to be fighting five hundred men and machines. So to make sure they don't reach us, we've set up a few obstacles for them to get past."

"Count! Count Eulis!" There was a yell from somewhere behind them. The men turned round and were greeted by a large middle-aged man running toward them.

"Sergei, what's the matter? Why the hurry?" Eulis asked his countryman.

Sergei was struggling to catch his breath though. "Th-there was news from the men we left to keep watch! The enemy... the enemy is withdrawing!"

"Withdrawing?!" Eulis opened his eyes wide. The two priests also looked at each other, both looked a little confused by this development.

"Are you sure?" Leon asked.

"Yes. The remaining soldiers are packing up their equipment and withdrawing. We did it, Count! We won!"

The large man was ecstatic. The report must have trickled through the citizens as exclamations of joy sprung up from all angles.

But, in contrast, Eulis could hear displeased voices behind him.

"I don't like this," Leon muttered. He looked exceedingly glum. He glanced at the townsfolk, who were all aflutter. "Three suits down is indeed a considerable loss, but that would not make them run with their tails between their legs. What about the other suits? We need to know the location of those still," Leon's voice was stern.

"Suits? They've entirely disappeared." Sergei looked a little downhearted that his news hadn't been well received by all. "They would have been picked up by airships, right?"

"The suits just disappeared...?" Leon didn't ask any more questions. He rubbed his stubble and thought. They could have retreated until more troops were deployed. Was this just an initial retreat?

"No! It couldn't be!"

"What is it, Father Garcia?" Hugue finally got involved in the conversation.

Hugue was experienced at simple combat, but he wasn't experienced at battle and war. He knew this, and since Leon's arrival, he had served as second-in-command. But now he had something to say: "The enemy's withdrawal should be a welcome development. We must continue watching them, but we can let the townsfolk rest for now."

"A temporary withdrawal or a surprise attack. The same thing happened in Morocco."

But Dandelion didn't hear what his colleague had said. He was looking out over the fields like a wild beast in a trap. "This isn't good! If it's that, then..."

Leon looked flushed and tense. His cheeks were bright red. Hugue looked to Leon and realized that it wasn't his cheeks that were red, but rather it was light from a pillar of fire that had suddenly shot up.

"Damn. We're caught!"

The citizens immediately descended into panic.

VII

"Antonio, get out the way!" Thousands of little shards of ice came flying at them, all of them as sharp as razors. The two men jumped to one side. The wall that they had been hiding behind crumbled and fell to the floor into a pile of rubble.

"Good at running, aren't you? Little rats!" Helga, the woman whom they used to know as Countess Anhalt, mocked them. To her, this was disgraceful, shameful behavior. She waved her wand above her head and circled it in the air. "I am the woman who targeted Maxwell's Magic Staff and lived. You should give up now."

The end of her small wand glowed. She was solidifying the moisture in the air into ice flakes. Each flake had razor sharp edges. The thousands of little shards danced around her wand before she threw them at the two men who were hiding behind the sofa.

"Refrigeration? Where the hell did that come from?!" Abel exclaimed.

Abel pulled on his trigger. He covered Antonio and jumped under a mahogany table. He didn't know how he managed it, but he had shot the shards out of the air.

Even so, he wasn't in the clear. He had only so many bullets. There would be more New Vatican cronies rushing to their location right now. He had to do something before they got there... but what? Abel hesitated.

"This isn't good, Abel. D'Este is getting away!" Antonio yelled, pulling Abel from his train of thought. He looked around and saw the old man escaping through a large hole in the wall.

He was dragging Cherubim behind him, desperately trying to flee the imminent battle.

"We can't let him. I'll back you up, Antonio!" Abel screamed as he watched the old man retreat into the hole. He didn't wait for an answer; he jumped out from behind the desk, gun ready. "Leave her to me. You go after him!"

He continued to shoot down the shards of ice as he charged toward Ice Witch. He had to get closer!

"What do you think you're going to do?" The woman smirked at Abel's efforts.

Suddenly, something was crawling at his feet. The floor was no longer made of stone cobbles. It was a pool of water. No, it was worse than that. It formed into an amoeba-like creature with tentacles that were now reaching out to him across the ice. "Crap!"

He wasn't going to be able to get her this way. He shot at the hideous tentacles to buy himself enough time to retreat.

The tentacles, though, weren't solid or liquid. They simply crumbled and reformed, over and over again.

"This is the Winter Maiden staff. It has a man-made soul. With the proteins that control water molecules, it can cool to one-hundred and twenty degrees centigrade below freezing point. When mixed with micro machines, it becomes living ice." Helga snorted. She was like a cat playing with her prey. "Beautiful, isn't it? It's a fantastic pet for a witch."

The pool of water seemed to match the personality of its mistress. It started to flow forward. It froze everything in its path as it moved. If Abel was caught in it, he would be frozen too.

"Argh! You give me no choice!"

An ominous light shone in Abel's eyes. His mouth opened a little to reveal sharp fangs.

"*Nanomachine 'Crusnik 02,' forty-percent limited opera...*" His blue eyes shone red. His hair started to lift up as if each strand had a life of its own. Then...

"We've finished with the fun, heretic! I won't let you do this!" There was a dull roar of gunshots from behind him and soldiers came pouring out of the elevator. Evidently, they had managed to get it working again. They all shot at once, aiming at Abel. "No! You mustn't come in!"

Abel's eyes had already returned to blue by the time he issued the warning. The soldiers barely caught glimpse of the witch's glowing wand before they were screaming in panic. "RUN AWAY! You're..."

The warning came too late. There was a scream as thousands of tiny shards of ice went ripping through their limbs. Blood spurted across the wall. "Wh-what is this?!"

The gigantic tuned soldier, Father Friedrich, was there too. But even his twin whips weren't a good enough defense. The ice ripped through his body and he fell to the floor—a mist of blood all that was left where he had once stood.

"Stop this, Christa. They were not a threat..." Abel wasn't allowed to finish. The creeping

pool of water had found its target. Abel's face screwed up in pain. Frost started working its way up his legs.

"Don't worry about those humans. Worry about yourself, Father." However, Helga sounded less victorious; rather, she seemed a little saddened. "So this is Crusnik? The 'enemy of the world'? Pathetic!"

The witch sneered. Abel let out a scream as he was entirely encased by the water.

VIII

"Good evening, heretics. I'm Brother Matthaïos from the Department of Inquisition," Matthaïos proclaimed into the microphone. The "Armor of Uriel" a blood-colored suit, proceeded slowly toward the civilians. He kept the nozzle of its flamethrower carefully aimed. "I have come here to annihilate you. Resistance is futile. I would appreciate it if you would behave while I crush you."

The flame that came out of the end of the nozzle was terrible and beautiful. People were fleeing in all directions. Those who didn't manage to escape fell to the floor, living torches.

Matthaïos gave a simple order to the machines behind him: "Number Three, Number Two: burn everything in sight." He then returned to operating his own flamethrower. He caught a glimpse of a mother running hand-in-hand with her daughter. It was only three-hundred feet to the entrance of the tunnel. He watched as they fought with all their might to save their insignificant lives.

"The Lord is all knowing. He is all powerful. He watches over everything. If they are not meant to die here, then show me a miracle. Save them from the flames. Those lives that are not saved by the Lord's hands are worthless anyway," Matthaïos muttered to himself.

He pulled the trigger on the flamethrower. But the flames didn't consume the mother and child. A flash of white light had sliced the flamethrower to pieces before it had fired. The Uriel jumped back, narrowly avoiding having its head chopped off.

"The AX member Hugue de Watteau is here!"

The swordsman jumped at inhuman speed toward the retreating Uriel. His slashing sword created a beautiful arc in the air.

"*I won't let you win!*" Number Two tired his cannon to protect his commander. The bullet left at the perfect angle. It was heading straight for the blonde priest. No human on the planet should have been able to outrun that. However, the bullet never found its target. The priest had skillfully avoided it. To add insult to injury, the priest then slipped through the next spray of bullets, avoiding every single one. He managed to run right up next to Number Two. "*That's impossible!*"

"Run. Number Two!" But Matthaïos' order came seconds too late. The swordsman sliced the suit's body into sections. Then he jumped back to put some distance between him and his enemies.

"Humph, so you're Sword Dancer?" Matthaïos said with glee. He replaced the cartridge in his cannon. "You evaded bullets from a cannon. You really are as amazing as they say."

"The bullets are only as fast as the men who pull the trigger." The swordsman's eyes glittered as he spoke. *"Yon can sense the movement of the person before they're even consciously decided to pull the trigger. Once yon have grasped that art. Then you can evade any attack."*

"I see. But how about this? Take a look behind you." Matthaïos was smiling cruelly. "What about that mother and child over there?"

The swordsman tensed. There was a woman crouched in fear, clutching her baby. He didn't know where the enemy was hiding, but he was going to find out.

"You coward!"

"Coward? That's not very nice. I'm not going to tell you to save them. But if you don't, then they'll die." Matthaïos grinned and readied his gun. He faced the swordsman who hadn't moved an inch. He was going to pull the trigger.

"Hey! Aren't you hot under all that?"

Finally, Matthaïos realized that there was another voice calling to him. He turned around and saw a large man in a cassock.

"You've been doing whatever you like, haven't you? Now I am your opponent. "

"I see; there's another AX Agent is here?" He glanced at the giant and turned his machine toward the new prey. This priest was in a vehicle. He continued to keep his cannon fixed on the swordsman. Matthaïos then correctly identified the new priest: "So you must be Father Leon Garcia... Dandelion? I looked you up on the Department of Inquisition's database, but there was no information on you."

Matthaïos took the other flamethrower that he had been hiding on his back. "Oh well. I guess you don't have access. Well, whatever. Maybe I'll hand you over to Intelligence Department. I bet they would love to speak to you," Matthaïos joked – badly.

He wielded the flamethrower around and pulled the trigger. But the person engulfed in flames... was Matthaïos.

Leon had managed to return fire with his own attack!

"What?!" Matthaïos' world went pure white. "Dammit... my monitors!"

The outside cameras were knocked out. The flash had burnt out the monitors.

Finally, they buzzed back to life. But the large man was now nowhere to be seen. And the swordsman had also disappeared from in front of his cannon. Instead, he caught a glimpse of the taillights of a retreating vehicle.

"I won't let you go, Dandelion. Number One and Number Three: follow them!"

There were three people behind him, according to his display. He ignored the swordsman who had jumped up to protect the mother and child. Matthaïos howled. The two subordinates who were also recovering from being blinded ran out in front of Matthaïos and began pursuing the vehicle. Matthaïos could murder civilians any day of the week, but he didn't want to let an AX Agent get away. He turned his jet skis to full power and sped off.

"This is strange."

But the Inquisition officer didn't have time to hesitate. Matthaïos realized that the vehicle was heading for the south of the valley. They would find it difficult to follow there.

"He's trying to get away from the mine." Or was he leading them somewhere?

He could be leading them into a trap, if he was playing at guerilla tactics. But Matthaïos thought that was probably too obvious and would be too childish. This was the man who had managed to defeat Berlusconi and his entire unit.

However, Matthaïos' guess had been on target. The vehicle was stopped in a pit. Something must have happened to the engine as, there was black smoke pouring out from under the hood.

"Your Eminence, please be careful," Number Two warned him, scanning the area. There was something suspicious there. *"I'm getting a lot of metal readings. Probably landmines."*

"Understood." Matthaïos sounded a little distracted. He moved his machine forward. He carefully stepped on a spot that was giving off a reading.

"Yo-Your Eminence, what are you doing?!" Number Two screamed.

Uriel was consumed in an explosion. He had stepped on a landmine and should have been blown to smithereens. But...

"Hmm. Not what I expected," Matthaïos muttered.

Matthaïos was feeling a little disappointed. He had been looking forward to something more. He moved Uriel forward. "He can't really be this obvious about it." The final trump card was a field of useless land mines? It looked like the end for Leon. "Fine. I'm leaving him to you now. Do what you want."

"Sir!"

Matthaïos watched the gray-colored suits run after their prey.

He stopped Uriel.

He'd thought that he had met an opponent who would really give him a run for his money, but his elation had been short-lived. The AX Agents were evidently only skilled at

combat; in war, they were lacking. Matthaïos had been wrong to expect more...

A voice entered the ears of the disappointed Inquisition officer. *"Your Eminence. It's Gambia, on the Jahael."*

There was a lot of background noise. Matthaïos thought there must have been a weather problem causing the interference again.

"We received updated information on Dandelion from Rome."

"Anything of interest?"

"Yes, he's a man with quite an interesting history. Special Forces Commander in the Hispanic army. His specialization was explosives. He served in both Morocco's War of Independence and at Gibraltar. He was decorated for his work."

"Decorated at Gibraltar?" Matthaïos squinted. He looked like he'd just been given a bad omen by the oracle. He thought that he had defeated this man; now, he couldn't help but look uneasy. "Why did he join AX?"

"Oh, right. Well two years ago, he killed his wife and thirty clergymen—including an archbishop. He was sentenced to death. But before he was executed, he was instead sentenced to a thousand-year prison term. There were rumors that the pardon was AX's doing."

There was probably more to tell, but Matthaïos' mind was busy working. "Hispania... Commander of Special Forces..." He reached to the scar on his forehead. "The Royal Land Forces, deployed in Africa, Twenty-Second Raid Party... 'Leoncoat.'"

All the while, his two subordinates were still chasing the vehicle. They were either delaying things or the driver had extraordinary skill, as they still hadn't managed to catch up with him. He watched on the monitor as the smoke continued to bellow from the landmine that had exploded.

As he watched, the smoke seemed to form a giant circle across the ground. It surrounded the pit, forming a perfect arc. For the first time ever, the Inquisition officer experienced fear.

"Moroccan War of Independence... Gibraltar War... Occupation of Tangier!"

No one outside of Uriel could have heard the bellows. Cambio was still talking, but Matthaïos cut him off, changing the frequency to a local one. He screamed into the microphone: "Number Two, Number Three: stop the pursuit! Flee!"

The vehicle was driving back toward the landmine that Matthaïos had purposefully set off minutes ago. The Inquisition officer's screams turned desperate. "Don't fire! You have to flee. It's a TRAP!"

But Matthaïos' communications didn't get through. Matthaïos watched in horror as the smoke continued to grow. Number Two seemed oblivious. The vehicle was littered with bullet holes already and seemed to be trying to flee to rocky higher ground. Number Two waited for the right moment and then fired.

"STOOOOOOOOP!" Matthaïos screamed.

The ground beneath Number Two's feet vanished. The explosion had caused the precarious snow banks to give way. The suit lost its balance and toppled over into a wide chasm.

The Uriel was no exception. Matthaïos stood, dumbfounded, as the snow caved around him. Soon the widening chasm would swallow him up too.

"Leon Garcia! At Tangier you were the one... Ah!"

That scream was his last.

"Well, we did it... just barely."

He had gotten out of his vehicle and was now looking down into the deserted chasm. Leon had finished his work. He sighed with exhaustion as he tossed the remote into the hole.

Now that the mountain had swallowed the metal giants, the snowfields had calmed. The sun shone down on the completely deserted plain. They had installed plastic explosives in metal cases to make them look like primitive landmines, which could also be operated remotely.

They had dug a circle of pits around the mines so that the energy of the explosions would be enough to destabilize the snow. Leon had to take the chance that he'd be annihilated along with them, but he didn't care as long as the plan succeeded.

"It wasn't easy, but I made it out alive."

"I've seen this trick before. At the end of the Gibraltar War — during the occupation of Tangier." The unexpected voice that met his ears was full of bitterness. *"I finally remembered: Captain Leon Garcia. Royal Land Forces, deployed in Africa, Twenty-Second Raid Party... 'Leoncoat.' The only man to defeat me!"*

Leon looked around. From out of the snow came a crimson giant, at least twelve-feet tall. Its giant claw swept Leon up...and squeezed.

Uriel's eyes were looking straight at Leon. No one should have survived that. The body of the machine was full of dents, and there were sparks coming from the knees of the suit. But the arms were in full working order.

"We didn't greet each other properly, Captain Garcia. This is the first time I have seen your face." Matthaios laughed. His voice was full of mischief. *"I was tricked by you a second time. But once again, I came out alive. I think God wants me to live. Don't you agree?"*

"I think your mind is playing tricks on you." Even though he was at the mercy of his enemy now, Leon didn't change his attitude. "I admit you have luck on your side. Can't we call it a draw today?"

"You don't shut up, do you?" Matthaios laughed cheerfully. *"Well, I'm glad to find you well. Now I can avenge the disgrace that I felt three years ago."*

"Gah!"

The fist that held Leon was slowly tightening. He was starting to feel the pressure on his ribcage. Still, he didn't let it show.

"I remember that! I also remember there was a sick freak who murdered thousands of civilians at Gibraltar. Could that have been you? The Moroccan Demon?"

"I don't like that name."

Leon seemed to have hit on a sore point for Matthaios. The voice coming from the speaker hardened.

"Three years ago, you buried me alive in sand. Today, I am Brother Matthaios from the Department of Inquisition. I am a soldier of God, working for His will." Matthaios' eyes glittered with hatred.

Blood was starting to seep through Leon's cassock.

"There is a reason why those who die, do, in fact, die, Captain Garcia." Matthaios laughed. He looked down and started lecturing Leon. He sounded like a missionary, explaining the wisdom of the God to the infidels. *"God is omnipotent. If you are not meant to die, He will perform a miracle and save you. Like when you buried me in the sand."*

"So you blame God for everything? That's not something to admire." Leon was starting to lose feeling in his body. The air in his lungs was slowly being pushed out. Still, from his graying lips, he managed to speaking chiding words to Matthaios: "People kill people. And people give life. That is the true miracle. You want evidence? Can you hear that noise?"

"Noise?" The Inquisition officer listened hard, but apart from the sound of Leon gasping for breath, he couldn't hear anything.

"It's a quiet night tonight. Don't try to buy yourself time... Wait, what is that?!" He did hear some interference coming through his speaker. The sound sensor on Uriel said that it was coming from the summit of the mountain. *"That noise... It couldn't be?!"*

The noise was rapidly increasing in volume. He looked up. The Uriel stiffened as if it had been electrocuted.

"Avalanche?!"

Avalanches usually happened in the spring, as the temperature warmed the snow and broke it up. But now, coming straight for them, was a huge sheet of snow.

"The explosion?! You planned this from the beginning?!"

"I told you — miracles happen."

It was in that moment that the claw, which was holding Leon, started to spark and issue black smoke. It opened. While they had been talking, the hydraulics had burnt out.

"Adios, Demon. See you in hell!"

"*Wa-wait! Garcia!*" The suit desperately tried to chase after its prey. Matthaïos reached out to grab him again, but his hand wouldn't move. The Uriel was too damaged; it wasn't going to take him any further.

"*Lord, watch over me! I have lived my life correctly and followed Your will! I have looked after the faithful, Lord!*" Matthaïos muttered as he watched the tail lights of the vehicle drive off into the distance again.

"*Why you...*"

The white wall of snow swallowed up Matthaïos.

IX

"So, are you ready to depart this life, Father?" Abel could no longer answer Helga's questions. Ice Maiden had completely swallowed up the bottom-half of his body. The frost was slowly working its way up his upper-half. Soon, he would be a statue of ice.

Helga snorted as she watched the priest freeze to death. "Are you afraid to die alone? Or maybe you won't be alone. I'm sure my colleagues will have caught up with your friends in the mountain by now. And Caterina Sforza will soon be following you."

"Caterina?" Abel's voice was weak. His words were now so faint that they were barely audible. "What about her?"

"No one's told you yet?" The witch looked gleeful. She approached Abel and stroked his cold, clammy cheek as if he were a beloved pet. "You're that worried about that woman. Ha, but you couldn't save her. That must hurt."

"Wh-what do you want?" His lungs had started to freeze, and he was losing the ability to breathe. Yet Abel managed to push the words out.

"I have only one aim, and that is to follow His will. By the flame, we will rebuild this world anew. That is all." As she spoke, Helga extended one of her slim arms up to the heavens. The light in the room caught the ring on her middle finger. Out of the ring shot a needle of ice. She pushed it toward Abel's temple. "Unfortunately for you, you will be dead, so you will never have the opportunity to see our new world."

"WAAAAH!"

A sudden scream distracted Helga. "You! You're still alive."

A black ball with whips swinging on either side came rushing toward Helga. The priest, whose upper body was covered in blood, roared when Ice Witch turned to meet his gaze.

"DIE! HERETIC!" She sliced Friedrich's body in two, like a fish. However, Friedrich apparently saw one last chance before he'd lost all control over his body. His burly arms threw one last attack at Helga.

However, she sneered at this. She took the whips in her hand. Ice slowly worked up them; they froze Friedrich in an instant. His body crashed to the floor and shattered into tiny pieces.

"Damn fanatics. Always go one step too far," Helga grumbled as she trod on the pieces of Friedrich. She turned her attention back to Abel. "Now, Nightroad... You're next." She turned around, smiling, but her smile turned to a frown. "What are you doing?!"

Abel, who had been so close to death, was now gripping the ice needle. She was surprised that he had any strength left in his arms. Even more surprising was that he was pushing the tip toward his own neck. It was cutting into a major blood vessel. Fresh blood was dripping out.

"Are you mad?!" Helga screamed.

She jumped back just in time as blood went flying in all directions. Blood hit the floor, the walls, and the ceiling. The Winter Maiden that had swallowed him was also dyed with the red blood.

"You're killing yourself? You're even more of a coward than I thought you were."

"Nanomachines..."

The voice Helga heard was foreboding. It was weak but terrifying.

"Nanomachine 'Crusnik 02' forty-percent limited operation — complete!"

The Winter Maiden started to quiver and shake. Its body, still blood red, started wriggling unusually.

"What is it, Winter Maiden?!" Helga exclaimed.

This was the first time she had seen her pet behave in this way. It was if the blood that had entered Winter Maiden's body was alive. It started glittering a brighter red.

"What is that?!"

The witch stood there, stunned. She didn't know what to do. Helga had easily dodged all sorts of attacks. But now, the red Winter Maiden was coming for her.

"What are you doing, Winter Maiden?!" she screamed.

Winter Maiden had always been loyal. Something must have happened with the micro machines. No, it was the priest's blood that was causing it!

"Crap! This is your power?!"

Helga's face screwed up. Now she understood. The blood had hijacked Winter Maiden. This was an impressive power. She would have to be careful.

"This is not enough to make me flee. As you wish, I will fight you, Crusnik."

With her other hand, she started to wave Maxwell's wand again. She was ready to unleash her full power.

Winter Maiden writhed in speechless pain. The micro machines in its body were destroyed completely by the icy laser that Helga had called forth. Now that Winter Maiden had lost its micro machines, it was nothing more than a ball of water. It spread out and then scattered into tiny drops of harmless liquid.

"Now it is your turn, Crusnik."

Helga once again sent ice shards flying at Abel. He easily shot the shards down, but that was all part of Helga's plan. Changing tactics, she thrust the wand to the floor. In moments, the floor was frozen, and small cracks started to develop. They opened up, threatening to pull the priest down into their depths. However...

"That is impressive. But it's not enough to defeat me," Abel taunted her. He didn't sound like himself, though. His voice was filled with what sounded like despair.

A black shadow ran up the walls and then launched itself at Helga.

"Countess Anhalt—or Helga—I will arrest you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Please do not struggle."

The shadow appeared to defy the laws of space and time. Helga stood fixed to the spot. She had no idea what to do. She thought that she could hear two swords coming down at her from above!

But she'd misheard; weapons weren't coming at her. A pearl-colored light shone from above and caught the monster's arms.

"Ngh." Crusnik grunted when he found his arms obstructed.

Mucus covered his arms. Something was happening. The areas that the mucus touched were turning a gray color. His arms were turning to stone. Furthermore, little fissures were growing into the stone.

"I'm being petrified?! Is that you, Basilisk?!" "Yes. It certainly was a close one for you, Countess." Standing next to Helga was a young man. He flicked back his wavy hair and smiled. "Well, even the beautiful Winter Maiden loses sometimes. Shall we withdraw for today?"

Someone else appeared. It was a small girl in a maid's outfit, carrying a sword far larger than her own body. "Let's save the chatting for later. I'll cover you. Leave!"

Crusnik leapt into the air. He deflected the first attack from the giant sword. His body twisted in the air, and he landed like a cat on both feet. He was just about to launch an attack on his prey...

But there was no one there. The young man, the witch, and the young girl were gone. He was alone in the room with a corpse.

"They ran away... or did they let me go?" Abel muttered in pain.

He used his scythe to cut off his petrified arm in one clean swipe. Blood sprayed out and started to take the shape of muscles, finally forming into a fully functioning arm.

Crusnik was alone. "Enemy of the world?"

"Take us with you, Your Eminence!"

"I can't! You have to stay here." Alfonso shut the door on the priests. It wasn't that he worried they might be too heavy for the elevator. There were only three of them: himself, Cherubim, and a monk who would act as a bodyguard. The elevator could have taken more people but he didn't want any more people that he had to look after. And, anyway, the more people, the more conspicuous they would be. They wanted to attract the least attention possible and flee Tallinn.

"I'm not finished yet!"

There was a getaway car waiting for them in the basement. With that, they would escape Tallinn and head north. There, they would hide. They could wait for the right time. They might be able to gather support in the northern countries.

"I will fight again. As long as there are people who are dissatisfied with Rome, I will fight!"

Suddenly, though, the elevator ground to a halt. "I'm sorry, it is over for you, Pope," a sarcastic voice spoke. "You must be tired. Now, you can rest up in a nice prison somewhere."

"Who is it?!" Alfonso saw the mouth of a gun directed straight at him. The owner of the gun pulled down his head to reveal his face. Under a pile of long, disheveled hair was the face of a smiling young man.

"Borgia." Alfonso's jaw dropped.

"It has been a while." Antonio smiled cheerfully, as if he had been reunited with an old friend. "I thought I could get you to do as you promised today. Do you remember? At Cologne? Do you remember when you told me you'd make me a cardinal?"

"A cardinal? What are you talking about? That was you?! The one who gave me a gift in the hope of getting a position?"

His distress was interrupted by a dull *thud*. The young man had knocked him on the head with his weapon. The world went black for Alfonso, and he hit the ground.

Antonio bent down and checked that the former archbishop was truly unconscious. He grimaced then looked over at Cherubim, who was still staring blankly into space, "Well, you'll have to be patient for now, Archbishop. You can reveal your true power later. There is a much higher place." Again he smiled like an animal eyeing its prey.

X

"In the trial of Cardinal Caterina Sforza, we find the defendant guilty of heresy and request the death penalty."

The female prosecutor, Sister Paula, read out her closing statement. The courtroom fell into silence. The crimson cardinal who sat on the judge's bench didn't raise an objection. There was not a single whisper from the gallery.

In the end, it was Francesco who spoke, his eyes closed: "I am sorry, Duchess of Milan." Professor turned to the defendant. "If I could... I'm sorry."

"It can't be helped. They had excellent evidence. No one could hope to defend me." Caterina glanced over sympathetically to the man who had fought her case for the last few weeks. She looked over at her half-brother, who was maintaining the awkward silence as he sat among the other top clergy members. She sighed.

In fact, no one gained anything from this trial's outcome. Francesco only welcomed more

scandal by doing this. The Vatican now looked very murky.

However, it would have been impossible to interrupt the trial. As soon as it started, the evidence mounted up against her—a suspicious amount of evidence—and Caterina had been found guilty.

"Everyone! Silence! Silence, please!"

The sound of a hammer hitting wood interrupted the beauty's thoughts.

The jury had reached their decision and had returned to the courtroom. The atmosphere of the court was tense as the judge unfolded the paper.

"I will now read out the judgment. This judgment follows intense consideration. It carries the same weight as an imperial command. For the glory of God," the judge read out the proscribed words before continuing on: "This trial has brought to light serious accusations of heresy perpetrated by the defendant, Caterina Sforza..."

"Wa-wait!" The voice was meek, but everyone in the courtroom had heard it. All eyes focused on its source. Caterina was no exception. She opened her eyes and looked around at the young boy in white clothing who had entered the room.

"Alek?! What are you doing here, child?"

Alessandro winced. Another figure followed behind him. It was a blonde priest with tattered clothing. Alessandro looked like he was about to cry. "Pie-please wait before deciding on judgment. I bring an important witness."

The other intruder now spoke: "I'm sorry for the intrusion. I am Nightroad of the Papal State Affairs Special Operations Section." Nightroad nodded gently to Alessandro and then turned to look around the courtroom. His face was deadly serious. "We have carried out our own independent investigation into the accusations concerning Cardinal Caterina. We have found an important witness in this case. I would like you introduce former Archbishop of Cologne, Alfonso d'Este."

As a third figure entered the room, the clergy frowned.

This priest was in a similar state of disarray. He screwed his face up as he looked around. He had once been the most powerful man in the Vatican, but now he was public enemy number one.

"Everyone, our investigation has found that there are serious questions about the authenticity of the list of names. In fact, we believe the list to have never existed in the first place!" The blonde priest paused to let this information be digested by his audience. "The names of participants in New Vatican are memorized by each participant; it is never written down. It follows that the list is a fake. D'Este himself will bear witness to this."

"Objection!" the prosecutor shouted. Sister Paula threw an out-of-character glare at the priest and then said with hostility in her voice: "Cases have been made by the prosecution and the defense. We've made our final statements. Additional witnesses will not be permitted at this stage."

"Oh my, Vice Chief. Have you forgotten Article 26, Section 8, of the heresy laws? It states that new evidence may be presented until the judge has made his statement," Professor countered.

His argument was logical and true; Paula had no choice but to relent.

Professor had looked exhausted, but he now had renewed vigor. He started to speak more nuggets from his vast knowledge: "There is also the edict of Bonifatius of August third, five-twenty-eight AD. Are you aware of the Sabatini trial? What? You don't know? Fine, let me explain it to you now..."

"That's enough, Professor Wordsworth." All eyes were now on Francesco, who had been maintaining his silence in the gallery until now. "The Department of Doctrinal Affairs and the Department of Heresy Investigation drops the case against Cardinal Sforza." Francesco spoke quietly, and his tone was carefully moderated. "In the light of this new witness, we will reinvestigate the authenticity of the list in question. Is that acceptable to you, Your Eminence?"

"Huh? Oh! Yes!" The young Pope nodded his head like a broken puppet. He appeared confused but had at least understood that Francesco was dropping the case. "Th-thank you,

brother."

"The Pope has proclaimed it... Paula, I leave the rest to you." With a short order to his inferior at the prosecutor's bench, Francesco flicked his cape and left through the door.

Caterina watched him go, one of her eyes twitching from behind her monocle.

"I guess we can bring this matter to a close now?" Caterina turned back and looked at the four priests who were lined up in front of their superior. They were dirty and bleeding in places. However, the beauty did not flinch; she looked at them with such gentleness that one might doubt she was human. "It looks like you've had a hard time of it."

"It wasn't all that bad." The blonde priest scratched his head to hear his superior's gratitude. His colleagues behind him nodded in acknowledgement. "Anyway, we should thank you. You've had a lot of heartache."

"I'm so glad that you're all right, sister." The young boy hiding behind the priests spoke up, but he quickly bowed his head as he started to blush. "I was so worried about you, but Francesco wouldn't meet me. So I didn't know what to do. I'm sorry."

"Thank you, Alek." She wiped the tears from the pale Pope's face and then planted a kiss on his forehead. "It was because of you that the false accusations were dropped. Thank you so much."

"Sister... "Alessandro went even redder and looked away.

Caterina was about to say something to her tearful younger brother, when...

"Lady Sforza?"

It wasn't one of her inferiors that shattered this touching moment. At some point, the severe-looking woman in a suit and holding a fat file had approached them.

"I'd like to speak to you about the witness your staff members collected. I think that the Department of Inquisition would like to be involved in the questioning. Would you permit it?"

"Of course, Sister Paula." Caterina looked kindly at the woman, but there was also the glint of something else in her eye, like a shadow on a piece of perfect steel. "But shall we leave the details for another day? I'm very tired. I was very nearly burned at the stake... So I think I'd like to relax today."

"I'm very sorry for the trouble. You have some very capable men working under you." Despite Caterina's passionate remarks, Paula remained unmoved and did not let her guard drop for an instant. "Capable and loyal. You are very lucky."

"He is not my man, Sister Paula. He may look it, but I think he is simply another individual with the same purpose... Or perhaps a reliable knight?" Caterina rejected the nun's suggestions. But in her eyes, it was evident that she was proud of her jewel. Then, as if the heresy trial had never happened, she turned and left – the most beautiful cardinal in the world... with her knight following closely behind.

"Come and visit me whenever you wish, Sister Paula, – however often you wish and about whatever."

"What wisdom," a sing-song voice said to Francesco. The youth next to him smiled. He had been sitting at the fountain as if he had been waiting, and now he stood up. "It wasn't all that difficult, Cardinal Medici. You have to admire such strength of heart."

"They must have help from a cardinal... Master Borgia?" Francesco glanced at the young man with the stupid grin. Francesco didn't have an accusatory tone; he was simply stating facts. "It would be difficult for a priest to get an audience with the Pope. Only a cardinal could have obtained it for him."

"It would have been very difficult indeed." The young man didn't seem fazed at all. He smiled like a naughty boy. "The Department of Inquisition accused Cardinal Sforza. The case didn't have to be dropped because there was new evidence. But because His Greatness the Pope intervened, you had to step down. Nosy of him."

"No, that's not it." The young man was clearly pleased, but Francesco wasn't going to bite. "I wasn't enjoying that monkey show, so the Pope's appearance was right on time."

"Oh, Your Eminence?" Antonio prompted Francesco.

Francesco started to walk across the garden. His face suggested he had forgotten that he was supposed to wait on the Pope, who was also his little brother. "I must return to my work. I must ensure that the relevant steps are taken to end the trial. There is much to see to – including our next battle with that woman." He acted as if he were surveying his territory, not an ounce of defeat in his demeanor. He walked with a strong pace...

Francesco said something that no one could have heard but himself: "I have to find a solution to the issue of this woman. Power that will mean no one will be able to save her!"

The man with the greatest power in the Vatican pledged as much to himself and surveyed his battleground.

In the winter sun, the Cubola shone bright white.

"It was not my intention to criticize you, Countess Vogelweide." Magician's voice was the same as ever. He looked up at the winter sunlight peeping through a crack in the curtains. "Your actions put the Orden in a very precarious position. I would like you to be aware of this."

"What happened was a series of unfortunate coincidences." Ice Witch raised her eyebrow. She internally cursed her bad luck that this man had total monopoly over her beloved. She continued her empty words: "We do not want to get our hands dirty with these New Vatican people. It was just coincidence that Sforza was rescued. Please believe this."

"Do not be mistaken, Countess. I am not trying to criticize you. It is just that these unfortunate coincidences have put us in a dangerous position. That is all I am saying."

Magician looked up at the beautiful Ice Witch. Her eyes betrayed nothing. There was nothing to reveal what her true meaning, whether she knew of what had happened or if she was truly dumb. She may as well have been a dead fish.

"Cherubim reached the Vatican with information, due to these unfortunate coincidences. It is only a matter of time before they discover our locations – including this place."

"Leave that to me." If she had taken offense before, she was now trying to smooth things over. Helga's voice cracked in shame as she realized the trap she had created for herself. "Let me take responsibility for this. For my honor."

"I see... Well, I will not deny you this. Countess, I will leave this matter to you. I wish you the best of luck."

"Sir!"

With Ice Witch's acknowledgment, Magician's image disappeared.

Helga now glared at the empty space. This man was always hovering with the one she loved. If he hadn't been around...

"You'll see, Magician. When this is over, you'll..." The words spilled like daggers from her plump lips. She would get rid of him soon. That was certain. But she couldn't make any mistakes until then.

"First, Sforza and AX."

Howl on the Edge

He arose, and smote the Philistines until his hand was weary,
and his hand clave unto the sword.

—2 Samuel 23:10

"The youth pushed the spectacles up his nose as he gloomily muttered, "Confidential information has slipped out to the enemy. It is just as Your Excellency expected."

Standing in the center of the dimly lit room was a half-transparent figure. The holograph of Count of Bruges Gie du Granwelle rubbed his forehead.

"I doubted that we had a betrayer in our midst, but this is proof."

"I'm very sorry. But it is true, Count of Bruges. We have a traitor," Count of Brussels Thierry Darsus replied as he stabbed a giant steaming lobster with his knife.

The room was lit by an old-fashioned candlestick. The curtains were drawn tight. Butter poured from the dish in the flickering candlelight. The city-state of Brussels was a place • of culture, but the counts preferred cuisine was Frankfurt food.

The old man put on the most impressive display of a glutton as he ate this top-rate food. "We knew when our trap was ruined. That was no coincidence. The Vatican assassin Watteau knew what we were going to do. That's because someone was telling him."

"We've still not been able to apprehend Hugue de Watteau." The young man lowered his eyes, deep in thought. After a pause, he spoke again: "Your Eminence, why don't you leave your territory for a while? Our enemy is persistent. There is a possibility they may go after Your Eminence again."

"No, that's not possible. It doesn't matter who they are or how many there are, as long as I'm here, they won't lay a finger on me. I should be the one recommending that course of action to you, Count of Bruges. If they can't go for me, they may indeed target you instead. As you said, this is a persistent enemy. I'm sure that he will go after you before me. Ah..."

Darsus was cut off suddenly as he skillfully pulled the shell off the lobster. The old man was quiet as he pushed the flesh into his mouth. It was as if he'd entirely forgotten he was even having a conversation. His teeth moved the meat around his mouth and down into his throat. He was satisfied. After a minute, he spoke again: "Why don't you come to Brussels for a while? The police are looking for the man now. You can wait here with me until he shows his face again. It's been over a year since we saw each other. You'll come and spend some time with a man who hasn't too many years left on this earth, won't you?"

"Your Excellency, you show me great kindness, but..." A shadow was suddenly cast on his face and he looked stricken. Gie struggled for words but then shook his head in shame. "We don't know how long it will take for the police to track down the culprit. I couldn't intrude on your kindness for that much time."

"Of course you can. You'd be keeping an old man company. We've lost Karel and Memlink. I'd never forgive myself if the enemy got his hands on you, too... Gie, I don't have much longer left."

Only the shell of the lobster was left now; it had been cleaned of any morsel of meat left. Darsus' voice was calm and welcoming. He looked at the youth gently as a retired man might have looked at his grandson who was about to take over the family business.

"The youth are our future, and this is your time. I couldn't say this when Karel and Memlink were around, but I never thought as highly of them as I do you... I want you to follow in my footsteps.

You won't let me down, will you? You know that I have no heirs, and I want a promising young man like yourself to inherit my estate."

"But, Your Eminence..." Gie appeared to be totally lost for words now. Rather than feel joy at this revelation, he seemed confused. He shook his head. "I'm very grateful, but I am too inexperienced —"

"Modesty is not a virtue here, young man." The old vampire smirked. "I have already decided. The real reason behind asking you to visit is that I would like to make the announcement that you are my successor. You won't let me down will you, Gie?"

"Of course not."

Perhaps if Karel and Memlink were still alive, he would have been able to show how he felt. But Gie instead nodded, his expression of fidelity not cracking once. "I'll join you in the next few days. Where are you now, Your Excellency? I know that you're in Brussels, but where are you staying in the city? Are you in your mansion?"

"The mansion is too dangerous with a traitor in our midst." The old man smiled, clearly

proud of the care he was taking of himself. He dabbed the edges of his mouth with a napkin and then pushed a button on top of the table. "But whoever he is, he won't get me here. Even if he sprouted wings, he wouldn't be able to get in here."

There was a dull sound. The curtains moved to reveal a starlit sky. Below the stars shone two moons on a plateau of clouds. *Ommegang*—a huge airship—flew two-thousand and seven-hundred feet above Brussels.

The old vampire stretched out his legs. He grinned at the holographic youth who was watching him. "I look forward to showing you around when you get here. Tell me the date that you intend to visit, and I'll have you picked up from the station."

"I understand. I'll deal with the remaining items here and take the journey to you." Gie confirmed the arrangements and then the holograph disappeared.

A middle-aged man who had been standing silently in the corner of the room stepped out of the gloom now. "Was that true?" The man was dressed in the dark blue uniform of Alliance Police. He made no attempt to hide his surprise at what he had just heard. "Are you really going to make him the heir of Brussels?"

"Did you really think I would make someone like him my heir, Blunt?" Darsus squinted at the squirrel-like man in front of him. His wrinkled face was now cold, as if he were a completely different man. The grin still folded his withered skin as he spoke again to Police Inspector Ray Blunt: "The reason I want him here is so that I can use him to smoke out the Vatican assassin. The assassin is bound to show his face when he learns that Count of Bruges will be in the city. I will give him Gie."

"You're using Bruges as bait? But surely that would put Count of Bruges in a lot of danger. Our opponent is very skilled. Something might happen to the count before we capture the assassin."

"That won't be all bad," Darsus muttered, an unnatural smile still on his face. He picked up his wineglass and raised it high. He looked at the police officer and shook his head as if the man in front of him were nothing more than a dumb puppy. "You don't see, inspector? Two of the four barons are dead — Karel and Memlink. Who poses most danger to my position? Who is my real threat?"

"What... But... then...?!" Finally Blunt understood what the old man was saying. There was surprise and fear written all over his face.

Darsus ignored his puppy's astonishment. He sniffed his wine and slowly smiled. "We need to make sure that news of Gie's visit reaches Watteau's ear in a way that it doesn't arouse suspicion. It doesn't matter who survives — Gie or Watteau. I will steam and fry them until the dish is exactly to my taste."

II

"The gentleman looked down at the trembling girl on the bed; he smiled in satisfaction. "Well, not a bad-looking little girl."

The girl, gagged and tied to the bed, was crying, afraid. The gentlemen seemed to be pleased at her tears.

The young man standing next to him quickly wiped the smile from his face: "Are you sure she's a runaway? Darsus will never let us hear the end of it if she's a local. Are you sure she's not from Brussels?"

"I'm sure. She only just came yesterday from Amsterdam."

The two men were utterly brazen as they discussed the fate of the girl that they had tricked into becoming their dinner.

The youth screwed his face up in disgust. "Ten years old. A little young to be a whore. But if Renault is happy.

"Right. She's a little too delicate for my tastes, but there's not much choice at the moment. Got to take what we can get."

The girl struggled against the ropes that kept her restrained to the bed.

The man kept his eyes firmly on her neck and licked his lips, where long wolf-like fangs were just visible. "Best that I could get. Darsus said we weren't to walk out on the streets alone. All I've had is medical blood... Five-thousand dinars?"

The young man nodded and reached into his wallet. Renault then indicated that the other man should leave. This motel was used by prostitutes and penniless lovers. Aristocracy should not be seen in this area. There would be trouble if someone recognized him, so now was not the time to spend talking over dinner.

"When I'm done, I'll call you. Please take care of her disposal. You must keep this secret from any aristocracy. Darsus would have my guts for garters if he found out."

"Understood." The youth quickly turned around, glancing at the girl who was silently pleading for help before leaving the room. When Renault heard latch of the door drop, he slowly approached the bed. "Miss, you don't have to be this afraid. I like little girls like you. You're just so sweet, I want to eat you."

Instinctively—or perhaps she had an idea what this man was planning—she started to desperately wriggle under her restraints, like a fish in a net. The gentleman put a pale hand on her shoulder and eyed her. Each time her gagged mouth tried to scream, her small white throat moved. The gentleman licked his lips.

"Some of my friends mock my hobby, but they just don't understand. The younger a girl, the more delicious she is." He grabbed at her blonde hair with terrifying force.

She struggled, but it was futile. Her throat trembled in the room's dim candlelight.

"That's good. Perfect." He was at the height of pleasure as he watched his prey struggle for her life. But his ecstasy was disturbed by a knock at the door.

"Excuse me. Room service."

"I bring a drink. May I enter, Mister Renault?"

"I don't want a drink!" Renault yelled at this unwanted intrusion. Pushing the girl down on the bed, he shouted, "If I want something, I'll call you. Don't disturb someone's fun."

Renault could hear an ominous sound on the other side of the door, like a sword being sharpened. In the next second, the thick door had been sliced in two; it fell into the room. Now a shadow stood in the corridor.

"Count Four! Thomas Renault of Brussels." The youth was wearing clothes darker than the night itself. But Renault could see the flash of a white smile as the intruder twirled a sword that was more than three-feet long.

"I've been looking for you, you vampire. You've been much more careful lately. My spies have made a real killing this month, selling information about you."

"Wh-what?! Who the hell are you?!" Renault demanded to know who the intruder was. Light blonde hair and pale green eyes were typical of the locals in this area. However, the black clothes he wore were holy vestments. But what would a priest be doing in a place like this?

The vampire's eyes widened suddenly. He remembered what he'd been told when he had been banned from walking out on his own. "You're... the Vatican assassin?!"

"My name is Hugue." The vampire was enraged, but Hugue remained listless. The sword in Hugue's hand danced through the air. He spoke again, a depth of warmth to his voice: "Hugue de Watteau... a god of death."

"DIE!"

Renault took his hands off the terrified girl, and she passed out. His claws sliced through the air, trying to turn his fear into concentration. He could hear the sound of his claws breaking, but the noise was mixed in with his own screams. He didn't understand what had happened. He just felt himself being thrown to the side. In the instant that he hit the wall, he saw the claws hit the wall right next to him.

This priest had extraordinary power—enough to be a terrifying Methuselah. But his movements were even more astonishing. What hope did he have?!

"Your movements are pitiful," Hugue muttered in the ear of the vampire, who was now desperately trying to recover himself.

Hugue gripped the sword handle, despite the screams of protestation. He stared his prisoner down, but just as he was about to make the final cut... something strange happened.

"Ngh?!"

A gasp of disbelief and confusion spilled out of the swordsman's mouth. His toned body now staggered backward. His hands were shaking.

"Not now. Be quiet!"

The priest muttered as he tried to control his hands. But the strange feeling crept up through his whole lower arm. It looked like he was a different creature from the elbow down. The priest threw himself against the wall like a madman. But the strange arm movement didn't stop. It got worse.

"Crap! Stop! Stop! NOT NOW!"

Renault's eyes glinted in excitement. The priest had lost control, and it now looked like he was undergoing some sort of transformation.

Hugue reflexively moved his arms to his head.

Renault took the chance to grab at the sword, which had only a few moments ago been at his own throat. "DIE, VATICAN SCUM!"

Renault swung the sword at the struggling priest. The timing and the speed were perfect. It was going to slice his enemy straight in two. But...

"Huh?"

The sword was stuck in the wall. However, the mad priest hadn't moved an inch. It was the *sword* that had changed its course. Or, rather, a bullet had changed its course for it.

Someone was standing at the door. The second bullet entered the vampire's head.

"Are you okay, Hugue?!"

The silver bullet had entered the vampire's brain. Blood, flesh, and soul were now lying crumpled on the floor.

A young man in a smart suit ran into the room. He approached the trembling vampire and supported him. "I came to see what was going on. What happened? Did he hurt you?"

"No. It's just a fit. Don't worry," Hugue said as his arms convulsed. He attempted a smile to try and ease the concerned youth. "I haven't had any maintenance. I'm not at my best. Sorry, Rodenbach. You've saved my life again."

"Don't worry, you'll return it with interest when we get Count Four safely."

Gerald Rodenbach was a young inspector from the Four City Alliance Detective Unit. He was cheery. Suddenly, he pointed his smoking guns at the corpse on the floor. "This is Renault, then? What about Darsus' location? Did he tell you?"

"He's in the sky. Somewhere we can't reach." During the conversation, Hugue's shuddering started to abate. Gritting his teeth, Hugue shook his head. "But there is another way. Apparently, Count of Bruges is coming to the city."

"Bruges is coming here? Are you sure, Hugue?" Rodenbach couldn't quite believe what Hugue was saying as he processed the information. "I've heard that Gie de Granwelle is young but careful. He's coming to Brussels? It has to be a lie."

"I don't know. But it's worth a go. If we kill Bruges, it'll be a real blow to them. It'll throw them into confusion, and then Darsus may show himself," Hugue answered. The trembling had stopped.

While Rodenbach considered this, he knelt next to the unconscious girl. He untied the ropes that had cut into her tiny wrists.

"Darsus killed vampires – his own family – ten years ago, and he kidnapped my sister. We have to find out what's going on and kill him!"

"Don't rush this, Hugue." Rodenbach watched as he gently covered the girl in a blanket. "His power is already so great. If we rush and make a wrong step, he'll find us. We have to be careful about every move we make."

"Are you saying to not attack Bruges, Rodenbach?" A light flashed through the priest's eyes. "You don't have to come with me. I'll go on my own."

"No, that's not what I mean. I mean that we should be careful," Rodenbach quickly said.

He was clearly frightened by the man's sudden rage. He continued with a tone that could have been interpreted as resignation, intending to pacify Hugue: "The next target is going to be Bruges. But please don't pull that scary face." "Sorry." The priest relaxed. The sudden rage was gone from his eyes, and his gaze fell to the bed. "I am sorry. I am selfish."

"Hey. We're friends; don't apologize, Hugue." Rodenbach seemed surprised at this sudden apology. "It's just a matter of time now. You'll get what you want. Your enemy is my enemy. We'll go to hell together."

Hugue was speechless. He didn't know what to say to this man who pledged eternal friendship. This was the first time he'd had anyone he could call a "friend" since ten years ago. He had "colleagues" in the Vatican. But that was just in work, and none of them were people to whom he felt close. Those were professional relationships. Since he had disobeyed orders, they were more likely to point a gun at him. But what about this man in front of him now? It felt so nice to have someone like this. He had lost his family and betrayed his childhood friends in order to take revenge. This was a long-lost feeling to him. "Thank you, Rodenbach."

"We should confirm what we've found out." Rodenbach didn't really understand Hugue's expression. Hugue looked confused and lost for words. Rodenbach was also stumbling to find the right words. He grabbed Hugue's hands and gently said, "I'm on your side. Hugue, I'm your friend."

III

Ray Blunt arrived at Brussels Central Station, Gare Central, exactly at six o'clock. The gaslights had just been lit. People on their way home began to flood in.

"What the hell is he thinking, getting a police inspector to do these menial chores?" Blunt grumbled to the middle-aged man wearing a similar uniform who was walking next to him. Blunt's gaze darted around the station like a jumpy mouse. "Even if it is Count of Bruges, he should have sent someone else. This is just too much from Darsus. This just makes a mockery of my position."

"I wouldn't think too much about it. I'm sure His Excellency simply puts faith in your abilities as an inspector."

The two men approached the VIP entrance. The entrance had been installed so important visitors could be protected from the crowds, media, and potential terrorists. They showed their identity cards and went inside.

The middle-aged man, Marlet, tried to placate his superior: "I'm sure that His Excellency wanted to send a police inspector to show Count of Bruges that he was being as careful as possible. This is a good opportunity for His Eminence to get close to Count of Bruges. Right?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps he intends Bruges to inherit Count Four. In that case, meeting and greeting him might not be such a bad thing for me after all." Blunt had the grin of a rat that had glimpsed some discarded food. With renewed vigor, Blunt climbed the empty stairs. The two police officers reached the platform just as the specially commissioned train pulled into view. The platform was empty of even station staff.

"Welcome to Brussels, Your Eminence Granwelle." "Thank you for coming to meet me," the young man stepping off the train replied politely. He was wearing a simple suit. His black hair was parted to the side, and he wore a pair of silver-rimmed spectacles. He looked like a capable but an inconspicuous official. If it hadn't been for the special train just for him and the ten formidable men that followed him, he could have been easily mistaken for a regular businessman on his way home.

Count of Bruges Gie de Granwelle looked up and addressed the men in front of him: "You must be Inspector Blunt. It is good to meet you. And who is this?"

"This is Chief Superintendant Marlet."

"Your Excellency. It's a pleasure. May I take your cases?" Marlet smiled and drew closer to the second member of Count Four. He reached his hand out to take the briefcase that Gie was

holding, but Gie was not going to let it go.

"I'm fine. Thank you for your concern. I would like to make haste to Count of Brussels, though. Will you take me to him?"

"Of course! We have a limousine waiting outside. We will take you to the airport."

The two police officers set off with purpose. They walked down the long corridor to the ticket barrier. The young vampire turned his eyes to the sky.

"You arrived earlier than we expected. We thought that you would come sometime after sunset."

"I didn't want to make it too late. That would be an insult to Count of Brussels." Gie replied. "Is there a problem with me coming so early?"

"Problem?! Not at all! It's just that this isn't the best time. There will be lots of commuters going home after a day's work, so the streets will be busy. We just don't want you to be uncomfortable."

"Ah, that's just how I wanted it. I was hoping that the streets would be busy."

Count of Bruges was the youngest of Count Four, but he was known as a calm and modest man. But his answer to Blunt showed that this young man was still the boss of a criminal organization.

"This Vatican assassin is still in hiding in Brussels. There is a possibility that I may be attacked. I think it necessary that there be plenty of human shields if that is the case."

"Oh my, Your Excellency! You are very clever," Marlet said in an impressed but exaggerated tone. "You really do have a good eye for strategy! I heard that you were a pillar of Count Four. They weren't wrong!"

"Odd." Gie was paying no attention to the superintendant as he babbled about Gie's greatness. Instead, Gie was looking at the empty ticket gates. "Why are there no Terran here?"

"Huh?" The two police officers had been too caught up in the greatness of the person whom they had come to meet to notice what had been going on around them. Blunt and Marlet opened their eyes wide when they saw. The entrance to the station, which had been packed with commuters only a few moments ago when they'd arrived, was now deadly silent. There was a police officer and a scruffy homeless man with a cart in the distance, but apart from that, the place was empty. There were no notices at the ticket gate. It was like they were in the wrong place.

"Huh? Marlet? This is strange..."

"Let's ask someone. Hey! Officer!" As his superior checked the area, Marlet called out to a young police officer who was arguing with the dirty homeless man. The other police officer looked up, irritated at first, but when he realized that it was the inspector himself, he forgot about the homeless man and ran over.

"Superintendent Blunt! Inspector Marlet! What are you doing here?!"

"Ah just a small duty." Blunt cleared his throat. "It doesn't matter about that. What is going on? Why is there no one here?"

"Huh? You didn't hear?" The police officer was now eyeing his superior suspiciously. He continued in a whisper: "Just a few moments ago, the Allied Government received a warning from the international terrorist, Hugue de Watteau. Apparently, there is an attack planned on central station... So, all passengers and staff have been evacuated. Please come this way. It's dangerous."

"A warning from Wa-Watteau?!" Marlet's eyes were wide open. Ignoring the tension of Bruges' entourage and the police inspector, he grabbed this young police officer by his collar and screamed: "What are you saying?! Why didn't you tell me something this important?!"

"But the official said..." The duty officer grimaced as Marlet's spit covered his face like bullets. "It was urgent, and we didn't want it to get out that it was Watteau, as it would cause a massive panic at the council."

"Ugh." Marlet bit his lip. "The warning was a trap! The station is safe! Get all the passengers back in here!"

Blunt was concerned. He could feel Count of Bruges and his entourage watching the scene

from behind him. The superintendent was swinging his arms wildly. He then tried to make himself look capable. "Get officers in here! Watteau may be in the vicinity. Don't leave any stone unturned!"

"Huh?" The duty officer was now confused by Marlet's seemingly contradictory exclamations. At first, the station was safe; now, Watteau might be near. The officer had no idea what was going on.

A husky voice spoke from behind the police officer: "Officer... May I go?" When had the homeless man approached them? It was the same man that the duty officer had been arguing with when Count of Bruges and his bodyguards had entered the ticket gate area. He was probably just a bum, hoarding newspapers and magazines on his large cart. He looked up at the men from under his hood. "If you're finished with me, I'd like to get on my way."

The officer swung round, enraged that his conversation had been interrupted. "Are you still here?! Get out of my face!"

"But shouldn't you inform the superior of what I told you? The suspicious man I saw? His name was Hugue de Watteau. The infamous terrorist."

"Wait there, you..."

Gie and his entourage had not ventured to say a word while the humans spoke, but now, he decided to intervene. Gie glanced over the cart that the homeless man was pushing. "Show us what is in that cart. And take off your hood. Show your face," Gie said firmly.

"Oh my, Count..." Marlet was confused at the vampire's sudden demands. He smiled kindly, though. "What would you want with this filthy homeless man?"

"You haven't noticed, Inspector?" Gie muttered, ignoring Marlet's insipid smile. Gie pushed his glasses up his nose and continued: "The cart is full of newspapers, but the dates are all different. That's odd, don't you think?"

What Gie was saying was entirely true, but there was no response from the people standing around the ticket gate. To be more precise, they couldn't respond. In a second, the homeless man moved with lightning-fast speed.

"HUH?!"

The police officers heard the sound of metal slicing through flesh.

"Count of Bruges?!"

A great deal of liquid hit the floor.

The sword had pierced Gie's chest.

"Argh." He was skewered. He reached his hands out to the youth who was dressed as a homeless man. He swiped with his sharp fingernails at the hood. "Wa-Watteau?!"

The last words Count of Bruges managed were the name of his attacker. The blood now leaking from his skewed heart burst from him. It gushed out like a waterfall. A wound like a stab to the heart was not instant death for a Methuselah. There was an extraordinary amount of noise as the blood gushed out of its soulless body.

"Bru-Bruges?!"

"Your Excellency?!"

"Get out the way, Terran!"

The scream and the arm that shoved Marlet and Blunt aside didn't belong to the swordsman. But the sight did make the swordsman grin. It was one of the black-suited men who had been behind Gie. "Vatican scum! I won't let you out of here alive!"

"Shouldn't I be the one saying that?" He kicked at the dead vampire's arm. "And this one..."

Gie covered his face with his hands. It looked a little strange, considering the situation he was in.

"I'll kill every one of you here. I won't let a single one of you go alive!" Hugue said.

"You will not disrespect me!" The manic vampire reached out his claws in an attempt to tear up the Terran before him.

But this swordsman knew no fear. His expression stayed brazen. He smirked. "You're the ones who are disrespectful. Come on, Rodenbach."

In the next moment, there was a huge white cloud of smoke. The young police officer had thrown a match on the newspaper cart, releasing an explosion. The young officer had then pushed the cart and its white smoke at the vampires.

"Crap! Gas!" one of the vampires yelled as they all desperately tried to cover their mouths. The fire had released a powerful tear gas that quickly flooded the area. The gas affected everyone's breathing and sight, so it was very effective. The chemical was very strong and would knock a normal man unconscious. The vampires screamed.

"Hmm, vampires are pathetic." Hugue grinned evilly under his gasmask. Neither Gie nor his men had put up much resistance. It was a bit of a disappointment, considering the preparation that had gone into this.

"Hugue, what are you doing?! Let's get out of here!" Rodenbach, still in his police uniform, yelled at the sneering Hugue. He pulled out his pistols and indicated that they should get a move on. "There's only twenty seconds of gas. We should get out of here before then."

"Twenty seconds, you say?" Hugue's eyes glinted at the sight of the suffering vampires. The plan had been to run when the gas was released, but considering the state that the vampires were in, Hugue didn't see any point in hurrying. "Rodenbach, change of plans. Let's kill them."

"Hugue?!" Rodenbach tried to stop his bold but foolish companion. However, his admonishment didn't reach Hugue's ears. His sword unsheathed, he headed into the smoke and raced toward the spluttering black vampire.

"St-stop it Hugue! Leave them! Let's get out of here!"

"If we kill them, we don't have to run away," the swordsman muttered as he approached the vampire in his blind spot. The vampire finally noticed the approaching danger. Hugue raised his sword, ready to make the final blow. "I'll start with you. Die, vampire!"

The flash of light formed a perfect arc. If the vampire hadn't raised his arm in surprise, his skull would have been sliced in two. Instead of sacrificing his face, he sacrificed his right arm. Blood gushed out in a huge torrent. The swordsman pulled his sword around and moved it up in the same arc as before, catching the vampire's left arm and severing it at the elbow.

"This is it for you." Hugue looked down at the armless vampire and smirked. His victim looked up and saw the fires of hell shining in the man's eyes.

Then there was a sudden change.

"What?!"

The vampire was no longer looking his death in the face. The swordsman was just readying himself to decapitate the man in front of him when he let out a squeak. He hadn't been attacked. Yes, the other vampires had managed to recover themselves in the quickly thinning smoke. The swordsman's face was screwed up at a threat other than them, though.

"Crap. Not now."

Hugue grasped at his right arm, which had started to shake violently. That wasn't all: it was as if his muscles had a life of their own and were now squirming.

"Stop this!"

"Hu-Hugue! Behind you!" Rodenbach's warning was just a moment too late. A flash of light moved across Hugue's vision. The claws of a female vampire cut through the air at a speed faster than the human eye could process. Her target was the side of Hugue's face.

"Ngh?!"

If his reaction had been just a few seconds later, his face would have been sliced straight off. Instead, he had moved his right arm up reflexively. There was now a gaping hole in his arm, revealing his impressive man-made muscles. There were a few sparks; the fingers lost their power. Hugue's long-sword dropped to the ground.

"DIE. TERRAN!"

In a crude twist of fate, the tables had turned on Hugue. He found his words being spat back at him. The scowling vampire's claws came at him from the left this time. Even if he tried to swing the scabbard that was still clutched in his left hand, it wouldn't have done any good. He was caught entirely off-guard.

Seeing that Hugue was having problems, the female vampire took a swing at him with

both arms. "This is it for you."

He was going to be killed. He couldn't defend himself.

"Hugue!" A shadow pushed between the swordsman and the vampire.

"Ro-Rodenbach?!"

The two claws were struck in Rodenbach's back, severing several blood vessels. Crimson liquid oozed out of him like flowing red hair.

"Hugue! Get out of here!" The young man's face was covered in blood; more blood oozed out of him as he spoke. "Hugue. Get out of here."

There was the sound of gunshots. Two bullets hit the female vampire at close range. The two claws in Rodenbach's back disappeared in that instant, but a huge torrent of blood replaced them.

"Rodenbach."

"Don't touch me!" Rodenbach screamed when Hugue instinctively stepped forward to hold him.

Like the sun piercing through clouds, little fires were now slowly becoming visible around the tear gas. Rodenbach aimed his pistols at the shapes near the lights. His bloodied face glanced over his shoulder and looked at Hugue. A faint smile formed on his lips. "My time has come. You have to go, Hugue."

"Don't be an idiot! What are you saying?!" Hugue's right arm hung limp and powerless at his side. It looked as if it were close to dropping off. Hugue gritted his teeth in pain and screamed at his friend: "You're the one who should be running! Leave me!"

"Not much of me left to run." Blood was pouring out of his severed artery. Rodenbach was clearly in pain, but still, he smiled. He leaned against the wall and used his pistols to keep the vampires back. "I can't run anymore, and even if I did get away, there's no helping me now. I'm sorry, Hugue. You have to go alone now." "But, I..."

"You must understand, Hugue." The young man turned to look at Hugue again. Hugue was older than him, but somehow, the youth seemed to have gained years in this moment. Each thing he said cut straight through to Hugue's heart: "Darsus is still alive. If we both die here, who will defeat him? Please, Hugue. Don't let me die in vain."

Hugue couldn't say anything now. He sighed and was silent for a moment before replying, "I'll go." Hugue could barely get the words out. "I'll go. I'll defeat Darsus. I'm sorry, George."

"I'll leave it to you, then. You leave this to me," the young man said as blood continued to trickle from his mouth. Finally, he managed a light smile. The two guns were shaking in his hands. He turned back once again and left Hugue with a final thought: "See you friend. Farewell."

His parting words were almost obliterated by the sound of gunshots.

IV

The Grand Platz—a giant square in the heart of Brussels— was known as the most beautiful plaza in the whole world and as a fabulous stage.

The space was flanked by the "Home of the King," which was the Allied Government's headquarters and home to lots of other buildings of historic importance. It was in no way inferior to the great squares of Rome's San Pietro Platz and Venice's San Marco Platz.

White Rose House—a mansion that used to be the headquarters of the Brewers' Guild— stood at the south of the square. It was an inconspicuous building. But someone with good sight might have noticed guards hidden in the ancient building. They might have even noticed the smell of blood that surrounded the building.

At the top level of the building, the mansion's owner sat at the desk in his library and took a sip from his wine glass, perhaps satisfied with his property. "Humph, so Watteau was injured, but he still managed to get away. Perhaps I came down to earth a little preemptively?" Darsus eyed the ten men and women who were stood stock-still in front of his desk. He took a drag of

his tobacco. "We've lost Gie. Now I'm the only one left of Count Four."

"Our deepest apologies, Your Excellency."

In front of him stood the men of Count of Bruges. Their heads were bowed and they all had glum faces.

Standing a little to the side of them was Blunt, He was eyeing the vampire. "It is my fault that we lost Count of Bruges. It is my crime! Death is not enough!"

"You feel too much guilt, Blunt," Darsus said, shaking his head generously. He looked over at the sullen men of the lost count as he tried to pacify the Terran. "Gie's death is a great sadness, but it is not your fault. It is all the fault of this assassin. You must find him at all costs. It is the only way you will atone for your crime."

"Wa-Watteau was seriously injured. We have mobilized the police forces into finding him. We will have apprehended him by tomorrow."

"I certainly hope you do." Darsus nodded, pleased at Blunts confidence.

Darsus turned to look out the window. The sun was just starting to set, and people bustled in the crowds at the Grand Platz, making long shadows. In the flickering light of the fire, carpenters and stoneworkers worked on scaffolding and a provisional stage for tomorrow's masked parade. Ever since he was a child, Darsus had enjoyed this event, which welcomed the start of the summer.

"Losing Gie is like losing a son to me," Darsus muttered and then fell silent. His expression was depressed. In truth, he wanted to celebrate that he had removed his strongest rival with little inconvenience. But he had to look like he was unhappy. "But tomorrow, you will find the man who murdered Gie. I look forward to you reporting the news to me."

"Won't you consider leaving the disposal of this assassin to us?" asked one of the black figures, his arms wrapped in white bandages. It was the same Methuselah who had been attacked by Watteau. "We would like to handle this enemy of Count of Bruges ourselves. Count Darsus, will you please consider allowing us this pleasure?"

"Of course. When the police find the assassin, I will hand him over to you so you can do as you wish, if it will make you happy to crush the enemy of your master."

Several of the men standing in front of Darsus expressed their thanks, and he acknowledged their gratitude with a sincere expression. He placed the sword on the desk and picked up a bell. "With Count Granwelle gone, I will look after Bruges. You take your revenge. Rooms are prepared for you. I will support your courage until you find Watteau." Darsus ordered the servant who appeared at the sound of the bell. "Show the sons of Bruges to their rooms. Ensure that everything is seen to." Darsus then turned his sights to the plaza again. He smiled as he watched the reflections of his guests retiring to their rooms. "The one who survives is the coward. Just like myself."

They were rehearsing for the show tomorrow. He looked down at the plaza that was filled with fake princes and princesses. Darsus took a satisfied toke of his tobacco. All his life, he had never been the one to pick fights. All his movements had been in secret. He tried to show the most respectable face possible to the Allied Government.

He didn't touch the church, and he didn't pick battles with the Vatican. Even when he had fled to the skies, apparently fearful of a Terran assassin, he had been mocked by the aristocracy for being weak. But look at the results: Three of his rivals were dead. The Vatican had come this far. The Allied Government did exactly as he asked. No one was going to make an enemy of Count Darsus now.

"All on my own, now."

He recalled the sight of the fleeing Terran, who looked like drowning rats. Darsus turned his eyes to the desk. Seeing the white sword on it made his grin even wider.

Hague de Watteau had ignored the orders of Rome and came after me himself. Now he's lost his arm and his prey. There's nothing else he can do. Even if he discovers my location and comes looking for me in a crazed lust for blood, the White Rose House is protected by thirty Methuselah and more than one hundred Terran. Not to mention the Lost Technology surveillance machines. He'll be sliced to bits as soon as he approaches the front door.

"Cheers to me!" He poured the red liquid down his throat, completely enraptured by his own cleverness.

"What about Count Bruges' body?" asked Blunt.

"It is being looked after by the police at the moment," a guard answered. His rat face made an attempt at sympathy. "We had wanted to bring his body here, but with all the chaos at the station... you know. It was difficult to remove it secretly. It's being looked after in the morgue for a while."

"I see. But they said that they didn't know anything about his body?"

"That Watteau man is observant. It was decided that it was best the body was kept in secret."

"Well you don't have to worry about that, Inspector." The young Methuselah's nostrils flared a little as he spoke with an air of inflated importance: "The entire mansion is covered by surveillance technology. No expense was spared. This is the best system possible. The central surveillance room is manned twenty-four hours a day, so there is no chance of an intruder being missed. It would be impossible for even a Methuselah to enter here."

"That is impressive," the young aristocrat enthused. "I was wondering if I may take a peek. I would like to see this Lost Technology of which Count of Brussels was so proud."

"Yes, sir." The Methuselah felt pride, empowered by his position. He wanted to show off. "Please walk this way. But I must ask you to not touch any of the machinery." He unlocked the thick metal door and pushed it open, signaling for the young Methuselah to enter. The many Terran who were carefully watching the monitors turned to see who had entered, but when the familiar Methuselah indicated that they didn't need to worry, they turned back to the screens.

"This is astounding. This system is indeed extraordinary. The aristocracy of Brussels is very impressive."

"This room alone cost almost the whole state budget." The man was getting into his new role as tour guide now. "I know His Eminence is very attentive to these things, though, so I guess he wouldn't mind paying whatever it took."

"But it doesn't matter how excellent the system; it all depends on the operator. Used by people like you, it might as well be crap." The sudden change in tone took guard by surprise; in seconds, he pushed his sword against the young Methuselah's neck.

An odd noise came from deep inside his throat. The wound would keep healing, but with a swift twist of the sword, the victim's head could be forever sliced off. It was one of the few weak points that Methuselah had.

"What is going on here?!"

The guards had noticed the commotion going on behind them; they all turned around. There was nothing of the young Methuselah to see, though. They started to rise from their chairs... But in an instant, the rest of them were drowning in a sea of their own blood.

"Too slow. A few seconds and you would have gotten me," Blunt muttered, pistols smoking in his hand.

He pushed the surveillance men's bodies out the way and inspected the console. He turned off the switches, one by one. "Right. The surveillance system is down now, Bosch."

"Good work, Blunt. The rest, now."

The man called Bosch smiled. Twiddling the many knives in his hands, he quickly followed the Methuselah's orders. "Clear each floor, as we discussed. But you must not touch Darsus. I will call our master."

"I am already here." The quiet voice came from the open door. Blunt hadn't even heard it open. Men and women in plain black suits followed the man into the room. The leader was conspicuous because he wore a different color from the others. He had on a thin mask, and his blonde hair was tied back. "Good work, Bosch and Blunt. But you're thirty seconds late. Please

hurry." His voice was so well moderated that you would find it hard to imagine anyone would disobey his orders. Almost twenty Methuselah and one Terran immediately moved to the next phase. "Yes, sir!"

The masked man watched them run off. However, he suddenly noticed something and approached the console. He touched his rose tattoo and then carefully chose one of the many switches and flicked it. "Humph. It seems that he is here, too. Earlier than I expected."

With a buzz, one of the screens had come on. Looking at the display, the man smiled.

On the black-and-white screen was the main entrance. The grainy shadows of costumed performers were lit up by the burning bonfire. However, the purple eyes behind the mask were looking at one shadow in particular — a ghost dressed in priest's garb.

Clutched in his left hand was a metal stick as tall as the man himself. The man had his right sleeve turned up. The masked man smiled. "Just as you hoped. A stage for revenge! Take your place, Sword Dancer!"

V

One or two flickers, and the light went out. There was no indication that the light would come back on.

"Is the power down?" Darsus frowned. He looked up from the scheduled memorial notes for Gie's funeral that he had been reading. He took the glasses with no lens off his face and looked up at the ceiling.

Most lighting in homes was still powered by gas, but in White Rose House, the rooms were completely fitted with electric lighting. But the power generator wasn't in the best condition, and there were occasional blackouts.

"Time to buy a new one, I guess."

In this darkness, even a Methuselah couldn't see properly. It looked like the rehearsal was over and the plaza had emptied. Using the light that came in from the gas lamps outside, Darsus continued to read over his notes. Just as he was about to correct a grammatical error, he noticed something strange: Why was the mansion so quiet?

Every time the power had gone out, the Terran had caused a lot of commotion. Why not tonight?

"Hey! What are the Terran doing? Get the lights back on!" Darsus rang the bell on his desk and called out to the people who should have been in the neighboring room. However, there was no answer. The darkness and the silence were suffocating.

"Is anyone there?!" Darsus raised his voice. Irritated, he stood up and pushed open the door to the neighboring room with great force. But all that greeted him was silent darkness.

There were usually two Methuselah and four Terran in the room. But the only evidence that there had been people in the room were two half-empty coffee cups on the table. There were also some cards laid out, as if a game of poker had been going on.

"Hey! Where did you go?"

He looked down at the still-steaming coffee in the cups. Darsus was starting to feel concerned at the situation. It was hard to imagine why the Terran and the Methuselah would have left him unguarded without saying a word. Something must have happened. Clutching the long-sword in his hand, the old Methuselah carefully pushed open the door that led out into the corridor.

The corridor was silent. Apart from the sound of a ticking clock, the place was as dead as a tomb. The lights didn't show any sign of coming back on, either. But there was also a dull metallic smell in the air — the smell of blood.

"WHAT?!" The almost three-hundred-year old vampire yelped. It was close to a scream. He took a step back. The two men who should have been in the neighboring room were lying there, dead. Their ribcages had been sliced open. Darsus almost vomited. In the black voids of their chests, he could see absolutely nothing. Their hearts had been scooped out: a sure-fire way

to kill a Methuselah.

"What's happened?! What's going on?!" Darsus quickly glanced around the corridor. What were his men doing? How could the electric eyes placed all over the mansion have overlooked this?!

A voice came from behind the confused Methuselah: "Thierry Darsus, isn't it? Of Count Four?"

Turning around, he could just about make out the figure of a tall man in the corridor. It was a young man with a long metal staff in his left hand. His priest's garments were covered in holes and tears. His right arm hung loosely from the elbow.

This was the first time Darsus had seen those burning green eyes behind the blonde hair. But he knew who this man was without introduction: "Hugue de Watteau! Is it you?!"

The priest suddenly turned into a demon, running down the corridor with terrifying speed. He didn't have a purpose. It was like he was trying to run away. He rotated his staff toward the old man. His animal ferocity made the hairs on Darsus' body stand on end.

"How did you get here?!" Darsus couldn't help asking, despite knowing no answer would be forthcoming. He desperately parried the attacks with his sword. Where were the electric eyes and the Methuselah and Terran that should have been watching everything?

The swordsman remained wordless. He only moved to continue the barrage of attacks. Hugue used his weight well and swung his staff toward Darsus' skull. A Methuselah should have been able to avoid a simple attack like that. However, Hugue moved faster than Darsus judged. Although Darsus managed to escape the blow, the tip of the staff caught his forehead.

"Scummy Terran tricks!" Darsus felt rage as the warm blood trickled down his face. Finally, the wild beast within the Methuselah had awoken. With a howl, he launched himself and his sword at Hugue. "Don't get carried away, monkey!"

The sword was aimed straight at Hugue's face. If the priest had incorrectly timed his counter move, the sword would have sliced off his face. The metal clashed. The priest took a defensive stance, ready to take on the super-human strength of the vampire. However, Hugue lost his balance.

Darsus didn't miss his chance. He aimed straight for the right side of Hugue's face. If Hugue didn't move his staff up to block, this was going to be the end of his good looks. Just a few seconds before he met his death, he managed to raise it in a magnificent defense. There was a terrible metallic sound, and the staff was flung from Hugue's hands. He had lost his only weapon. He was completely defenseless now. Darsus had won. "Die, Watteau!"

"Those who live by the sword..."

Just as the blade should have finished Hugue off, there came a murky curse. The deathblow was stopped by a short dagger millimeters from Hugue's face. It was a miracle. Before Darsus had a chance to realize, Hugue had pulled out a dagger; the swordsman had seized his chance and, with a grim smile, he readied to kill Darsus.

"Shall die by the sword! Amen!"

Darsus had lost his balance. There was no chance of escape for him now. From the left side of his chest, through his heart and to his right shoulder, a gaping wound had been opened. The sliced arteries spurted blood. "Ugh!"

For a Terran, the blow would have meant instant death. The Methuselah were more difficult to kill. But even so, damage like that would mean a vampire wouldn't last long. Darsus dropped his sword and tried to let out a scream, but he couldn't...

The impact of the blow had pushed him to the floor. Hugue placed his foot on the old man's chest. Blood gushed from the wound with great force. The old man's eyes were white with fear; he couldn't even scream out in pain. Hugue didn't seem to even register the terror and agony in the old man's eyes. He simply readied his dagger. "Die, Darsus!"

"Wa-wait. Hear me out!" He literally coughed the words out. He looked up at the swordsman. The only thing that indicated that Hugue had a soul was the gleaming within his green eyes.

Darsus continued. It was his only chance. "I didn't have anything to do with the massacre

at Amsterdam Church! I promise!"

"Nothing, you say?" The swordsman's words were calm, but that made them all the more terrifying. "Do you think that's why I want to kill you?"

"Am I wrong?" Darsus looked up at the swordsman, silently pleading for something they could work out. He wanted to buy some time. He just had to hold Hugue off until his men reached him. He had to keep the conversation going. "Or is it the Watteau clan's destruction ten years ago? I didn't have a hand in that, either. It was Count of Bruges who ordered that! It was Gie!

"Bruges?" A modicum of emotion flickered in those almost glassy eyes. With the blade still thrust toward the old vampire, the swordsman spoke, his tone harsh and cutting: "Gie. Gie de Granwelle did it, you say?"

"That's right! He gave the order! It was all him. I only heard about it afterward!"

"Bruges..." The swordsman looked into the distance. He pursed his lips as if he had found something suddenly very funny, and he started to laugh. "I had my revenge back then."

"Th-that's right. It wasn't me." Darsus tried to pacify the man whose blade was perilously close to him. He screwed up his face in a half-smile, as if to look like he was joining in with the joke. His blood had stopped flowing, but Darsus couldn't make any sudden movements. If he could just buy himself some time... "Watteau. I think there has been a terrible misunderstanding between us. I have a proposition. What do you think? Let's talk this all over. Gie killed your family, and tonight, you killed mine. Surely we're even now? Gie is gone, so there is no need to kill me now."

"There is one thing I want to ask you." His voice was still cold, but Darsus could hear that something had changed in his tone. "Depending on your answer, I may leave killing you for another day. Ten years ago, a girl of the Watteau clan was kidnapped. Where is she? Is she still alive?"

The tip of the sword wavered a little. Hugue's voice was low but demanding. He squinted, as if watching something just out of his vision. His memories shaped the words for him now: "I didn't see who took her. He was wearing a mask. But he had chestnut hair and purple eyes. He had a tattoo of a flower on the back of his hand. I want to know who this man was."

"Chestnut hair? Purple eyes... and a flower tattoo?" Darsus almost forgot his situation. He couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. Perhaps Hugue had lost his mind. "That was Gie. Gie de Granville. The man you killed tonight. Didn't you notice?"

"What?"

Darsus looked up at the intruder.

Hugue frowned and started to raise his voice — the first emotion he had truly shown in this altercation. "Don't be an idiot! Bruges didn't have a tattoo! Are you making fun of me, Darsus?! Or are you trying to lead me off the trail?!"

"I'm not lying! The man who stole your sister was Gie!"

The old man's protestation sounded truthful. Hugue was confused, and he was about to make another rebuttal when he suddenly remembered something: "Wait. You said something strange. You said that I killed your men tonight. What do you mean? I killed Renault about three days ago..."

"Look up!" It was time for Darsus to get angry. He was able to move finally, and so he pointed a weak finger up the sky. "You killed all my men. Are you trying to confuse an old man?"

"That wasn't me. Everyone was already dead when I got here — apart from one man. When I entered the mansion, he was looking for a corpse. I thought that there must have been some kind of internal problems." Hugue went quiet as he thought. He raised the tip of his sword up. "Stand up, Darsus," the swordsman ordered the Methuselah. He didn't relax his muscles, though. "I'll kill you later. Right now, I think we've been caught up in something strange."

"Strange? What do you mean by that?" "I don't know. But..." The priest suddenly cut off his analysis. He heard something move. His body turned with the precision of a machine. A

sharp shaft of light swiftly moved past him. "Crap! Darsus?!" Hugue exclaimed.

Blood now was pouring from the vampire's mouth in pints. A silver arrow was embedded in the old vampire's throat. The area around his mouth was smoking. It looked like there was also nitric acid in the arrow's shaft—it meant instant death for a vampire.

A calm voice reverberated through the corridor: "Good evening, Count of Brussels and Mister Watteau."

There were several shadows now looming in the corridor. About twenty men and women stood there, dressed in plain suits. Standing in the middle of them was a man with a bow that still vibrated from releasing its arrow.

"I answered your invitation and came to visit Count Brussels, but you didn't come to meet me, so I made my own way here. I hope you don't mind?"

"You... You're Gie!" The old man was clearly angry despite the blood dripping from his mouth, choking him. It took all that was left in him to utter the name of his enemy. "Gie... Watteau killed you!"

"Ah, that was my double. If I had made it, you'd have just killed me anyway, right Cardinal Darsus?"

The man's voice held a cruel humor, but his expression never changed. He was wearing a very thin mask over his face. But behind the mask, Watteau could make out his purple eyes glinting with glee.

"Count Darsus, you planned it so that I and Watteau would meet. You then planned to deal with whichever one of us lived. Those are the kind of tactics I've come to expect from you. You did the same to Count of Amsterdam and Count of Antwerp," the new contender said.

"Gie... you... you..." Darsus' voice was breaking up. He desperately tried to point at the masked man, but it was too much. His body stopped moving suddenly, as if someone had flipped a switch inside.

And that was the end of Thierry Darsus—the top man of Count Four.

Words of hatred spilled from behind the mask. "What a disgusting excuse for a life form. He always did exactly as he pleased." The man, bow still firmly in his grasp, shook his head. His purple eyes looked down at the dead man. The masked man was lost in his own world for a moment, but then he suddenly realized the man standing next to him. "Well Hugue, I think I owe you some words of gratitude. You distracted Darsus so that he had no idea what I was doing. Excellent work."

"You're Gie?" He adjusted the grip on his dagger and asked again: "You are Count of Brussels Gie du Granwelle?"

"That's right. I'm Gie. I'm the man who crushed your clan." The man introduced himself without pride or fear. He answered calmly while playing with the bow in his arms: "Ten years ago, I burned your castle, killed your family, and took your arm. I did it all."

A scream never left the swordsman's throat. He ran like a mad dog down the corridor, his dagger ready. Before Hugue could reach his target, some of the black-suited people moved to make a human shield between Hugue and Gie.

"It's all right, Bosch. I will be his dueling partner," Gie told the loyal servant who had sprung to his defense. Gie twirled the bow in his fingers. He swung it onto his back as if it were a spear and then threw it with terrifying force.

The makeshift bow flew at alarming speed. With a howl, it hit Hugue's dagger, splitting it in two. The masked man reached for the rapier at his waist.

"GEIII!"

There was a spark of white light. The sound of metal hitting metal reverberated throughout the corridor. The two men jumped back like two repellant magnets, putting some distance between them. Hugue ran like a cat up the wall and pushed himself off it. "Your Excellency!" one of the black-suited men yelled the instant that the two rays of light clashed.

The dagger shattered Gie's rapier. Hugue then flicked the knife up, and Gie's mask was cracked.

It was Hugue that screamed, though. Protruding from his stomach were the shattered

parts of the rapier. Dark liquid oozed from his mouth. His liver and spleen had taken the hit. He was going to die.

"What?!" But through the pain, Hugue had noticed something. His green eyes had lost their taste for revenge, but now they looked up into the eyes of a man whom he would never forget.

On the other hand, the masked man smiled, clearly enjoying the shock on Hugue's face. Count of Bruges, the man in the mask, grinned at his opponent. "Oh, Hugue. What's the matter? Why are you pulling such a face? Are you in pain?" "It can't be."

He looked up into the eyes he had seen in every nightmare for the last ten years. Hugue shook his head in furious denial. "It can't be. Its not possible."

"What's not possible, my friend?" Gie asked the priest, who was desperately trying to deny what he saw with his own eyes.

But this man had the same voice as the man he had met two weeks ago, when he had saved him from Tres' purge. The same voice as the man he had scolded when he took the offered hand. The same man who had gone on his quest for revenge against the vampires...

Rodenbach looked back at Hugue.

"Maybe you're talking about the false name I gave you so I could get close to you? Or that I pretended to be a prosecutor? Or maybe you're mad that I took your sister Agnes?" Gie de Granwelle looked like a small child who had been playing a trick on his friend. His purple eyes glinted in untold joy. He added one last shameless blow: "I'm sorry. I would like to give your little sister back to you. But that's no longer possible. We toasted with her blood that night. Very delicious."

The swordsman howled as he looked into those cold purple eyes, and he saw his own reflection. He cursed the world itself.

"Priest Iqus, over here!"

When Tres Iqus arrived at the international platform of Gare Central, Professor was already there. He carried a light trunk. With an unfriendly expression on his face, he held his hand out.

"This is odd. You're not injured? But it seems there has been a lot of fun in my absence. Was Archbishop D'Este secured?"

"Negative. Alfonso D'Este has been on the run since the Silent Noise incident."

There were many policemen at the station today, as a result of the terrorist incident that happened a few days ago.

Tres casually checked that no one was too close before speaking again: "Nightroad arrived in Cologne two hours ago. He has made contact with the informant here. It is going as predicted."

"Ugh. Such boring work. The incident in Spain with the syndicate kidnapping was just the first step. Now it's more boring work for me. I need a bold criminal, one that is going to really challenge my brain. It's a total waste!"

Professor knocked some ash out of the pipe that he was smoking.

Only yesterday, he had solved and eliminated a trafficking syndicate in Spain. Finally the incident had been solved, and he had been about to return to Rome, when he was given new orders. He let out a loud sigh. "Well, I'm here now. I guess life is short. Anyway, what is the situation, Father Tres? My incompetent student is still alive?"

"The details of Watteau's well-being will be part of the briefing when everyone is here," Tres replied calmly as he looked at the train that had just entered the platform with his calculating glass eyes. After confirming that the train departed from Prague via Berlin, he robotically walked toward it. "This mission will involve three people, and it is to ensure the safety of Hugué de Watteau and crush Count Four. The members are to work closely. These are

orders from Duchess of Milan."

"Three? So who is the other?" Professor asked. The train suddenly let out a burst of steam from its engine. With a heavy clunking noise, the doors of the second-class carriage opened. Professor looked up to see who would emerge, and his eyebrow immediately shot up when he saw. "I see. He is the third. The duchess is always spot-on."

The man called out as he walked down the gangway iron to the platform: "William! Long time, no see! You look well. You too, Father Tres. It must have been a year." He looked exhausted from the journey, but his stoic face had broken into a smile when he saw who had come to meet him.

"Hello, AX member Father Vaclav Havel."

AFTERWORD

This as Sunao Yoshida. It's been three months since my last work.

This is the fourth volume in the *Rage Against the Moons* series, a real crisis point in the story. *Trinity Blood* has run to eight books now. I think each one of them is bad but the series still continues. It's all down to the readers who keep buying the books. Thank you so much. I owe you a lot.

There is a concept of "justifiable." Originally, it had meant something like "as long as what you were doing would improve things, then it was okay to do it." But it always depends on what you consider an "improvement" to be. For the losers, it sounds like nothing more than an excuse.

It's the same excuse for when I spend too much at the bookstore. I like to think that books are for work and that they're useful materials. I like to collect materials where I can find them though, and I often make notes of interesting things my friends have said while out drinking. I also have lots of articles, which I've found on the Internet, cluttering my hard-drive. I love keeping newspaper cuttings. Maybe I'm a Gutenberg Man. My possessions are overwhelmingly documents. There are particularly good bookshops in Kyoto. I'm always coming out with my arms full of books.

Anyway, how do these books help me?

Let's look at the bookshelf by my desk...

I have *A Journey Through Wales* by Gerald of Wales. He accompanied the Archbishop of Canterbury on a tour around Wales to encourage young men to sign up for the crusades during the twelfth century. He wrote down lots of the things he saw. Lots of small details like travel expenses and feelings that he had of the places he stayed. An extremely useful guidebook! However, I'm not planning to slip back in time anytime soon, so I guess it won't be that useful.

Next book is *The Taste of Bugs* by Satoshi Shinonaga. The book's aim is to introduce all the types of recipes that use bugs and insects in them. It would be useful if there were a nuclear war and I had to survive the fallout.

Flying on a Jumbo Jet is next to that. It explains how to control all sorts of vehicles from Jumbo Jets and luxury liners to submarines. If there is a surprise coup d'etat whilst I'm on holiday, then I would be able to drive to safety. So that could be useful.

I guess none of my books are really useful. I wonder what I was thinking when I bought them? Even more worrying is that I enjoy these pointless books.

"It doesn't matter if it's useful right away. The important thing is that it captures my interest. It will come in handy one day."

That's what I say to myself every time I go to the store to collect materials. I justify it in that way. But when I come home and see my eight bookcases and the fifty cardboard boxes piled up, I really start to hate myself. I'm so desperate for more space; I fall asleep on a bed covered in magazines. It's really tragic.

If I continue the way I am, then I'm going to die in a book slide. Or perhaps from brain damage when a book falls off my crammed shelves. Or perhaps I'll die of malnutrition when I

use my last pennies to buy more books. Only just now when I was cleaning up, a book fell on my head. It really hurt.

Anyway, next volume is going to be set on an island.

If I've not died under a pile of toppled books, I'll see you then!

—Sunao Yoshida.